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The Viper Pit

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THE VIPER PIT

by

BRETT HURST

JIM BRAZIEL, COMMITTEE CHAIR
KYLE GRIMES
RON GUTHRIE
KERRY MADDEN-LUNSFORD

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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2020

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2020

THE VIPER PIT

BRETT HURST

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

The Viper Pit was born out of a writing prompt from Jim Braziel's fiction writing class. We had to write a short story based on a photo from *The American Photobooth*. On page 174 of that book, a photo on the far right corner sparked my interest last year. It was the type of picture you see and automatically do a double-take. The man in the photo held the snake so close to his face like a newborn baby. The connection between the man and the snake ignited something in my imagination. On that day, I gave that man a name, Chester Davis.

Chester has always been a mysterious character living in my mind. Every time I would attempt to write a new short story, he would find a way to make an appearance. I couldn't escape him. I kept putting him in situations to see how he would react. How could someone share an intense passion for snakes? How would he handle someone harming a snake? What could go wrong in a house with two rooms dedicated to reptiles? A lot of stuff.

Part one showcases the origins of these characters (the ones that survive) and how one night can change not only everyone involved but an entire community. One wouldn't think such horrible things could happen in a town called Delight, but they do. Delight is very much a contradiction. Within *The Viper Pit*, readers get to witness a small town setting and how the people within it react to a man collecting snakes. Snakes are

everywhere when you look close enough. Whenever you find one, make sure to call the local snake guy, Chester. He will take care of it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I must thank Jim Braziel for going on this creative journey with me. Little did we know that we would be working together during a pandemic, but we made it work, and it's been one of the most informative and meaningful experiences in my academic career. Thank you, Jim, for your endless support, all of your time, and for being a part of this novel. None of this would be possible without you. Lastly, thank you for listening whenever I needed to share an idea, talk through a scene, or needed to get some stress off my shoulders. You made a bizarre two semesters feel like normal.

Thank you to Kerry Madden-Lunsford for instilling some of the best writing advice I have ever received. Kerry used to say, "You learn the rules, and then you break them" in the many classes I've had with her. And it's true in both fiction and non-fiction. Kerry, thank you for introducing me to the world of non-fiction and opening up new possibilities. Without you, I would've never read *Salvation on Sand Mountain* by Dennis Covington. Without your endless support and encouraging words throughout my undergrad and graduate experiences, I would not be the writer I am today.

Thank you to Ron Guthrie, who shares my interest and love for Stephen King. It's been a couple of years, but the special topics class had such an impact on me as a reader and a writer. It made me hyper-aware of the decisions I make whenever I write fiction. I remember going to your office one day to discuss our paper assignment. After, we ended up discussing horror movies and upcoming King novels. I wanted you on my committee

because I trust your instinct and knowledge of the genre. Without your class, I may have never read *The Stand*, which is the longest novel I have ever read to date.

Thank you to my UAB family. My folks at the University Writing Center have been keeping me motivated ever since the beginning. Without some of those staff Zoom meetings, I would've gone crazy this past year. A huge shoutout to Jaci Wells for creating an environment where writers feel safe and have the freedom to be themselves. Having that workspace is rare, and I'm grateful for that. Also, thank you to Kyle Grimes and Rebecca Bach for guiding me through these last few semesters and making sure I did what I needed to do.

Lastly, thank you to my family. Mom, Dad, Crystal, Drew, Brodie, Brooklyn, Alex, and Addison—I'm lucky to have you. You all keep me laughing, motivated, and grounded. Without your support and love, I wouldn't be the person or writer that I am today. Thank you for always reassuring me that everything will be okay whenever I start to question myself. This one is for you.

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Part One

Extraction

May 2008

Upstairs, Chester Davis remained sitting on the edge of his bed, fully dressed in a worn-faded polo with a pocket sewed into the left breast. The aroma of coffee slowly began covering up the sweet smell of Gloria's perfume, even though it had been at least ten or so minutes before she left for work. He felt his shirt pocket to make sure he didn't forget the small spiral notepad and the number two pencil that he carried every day. His son Teddy was rummaging through the kitchen, making Chester want to stay hidden in his bedroom a little while longer.

He didn't hate his son, he loved him, but sometimes he didn't like him very much. Both Teddy and Gloria were vibrant, creative, and respectful of others. Chester simply lacked those qualities, but he didn't care.

Teddy was at the age where he wanted to hang out with his two good friends, Mooney and Turnip Washington. They were the only kids he ever hung out with outside of school. It was the first week of Summer vacation, so he couldn't wait to see them. Unlike his son, Chester only had one passion that made him more unique than any other person in Delight.

He collected snakes.

Snakes of all kinds, no matter venomous or regular, he would scoop them up from the woods, his yard, or other people's property and store them in one or two places. The non-venomous ones lived in the room right across the hall from his and Gloria's bedroom. Chicken snakes, Black Racers, Kingsnakes, and Ringnecks all called that stuffy room home. Chester kept them as pets for a while but then gradually released them back into the wild. He only did this when he found a new species or if he got tired of looking

at the same one over and over. The regular ones were fun to play with because he wouldn't die if bit, but they became boring at times.

This space used to be Gloria's sewing room before the argument last year.

"You don't support nothing I do," Chester barked as his wife guarded the sewing machine.

"I do support you. But you have the basement for your snakes. Now you want to bring them upstairs? What if they get out and bite Teddy?"

"I know how to tend a snake bite. He'll be okay."

"I don't know about this, Chester."

"Look, if you don't let me do this then I'll go someplace where I can."

After that, Gloria packed her sewing supplies up and moved them into the dining room. Chester moved his regular snakes from the basement to the upstairs bedroom in one day, leaving the venomous ones down in *that dark, warm viper pit* as Gloria called it.

And it was. It was dark, warm, full of mold and webs, and looked like a room straight from a haunted house. The vipers were Chester's favorite. They helped him remember his father. Only the serpents could make Chester feel like he was in charge, powerful, and not some crazy lunatic people from town painted him out to be.

That argument between Chester and Gloria had long passed but something changed in her after he threatened to leave. They both knew those snakes were Chester's prized possessions, not his family. Gloria and Chester had been married for thirteen years, but even Chester felt their marriage vanishing. He was glad she worked most night shifts at the Delightful Spot diner. If she wasn't there, then she was picking up shifts at

the Thrifty Thrift, which made him happy. She was the breadwinner while Teddy took care of the house and cooked as best as he could. Chester was just a scale on the back of a snake, living in the space that Gloria and Teddy tried to call home.

In the vanity, he did not see himself as much as he saw the resemblances to his father, Sherman Davis. They had the same long, pointy nose, and the same physical build—the one that looked muscular from a distance but wasn't.

Teddy knocked on the bedroom door.

“What do you want?”

“Breakfast is ready, Dad.” Teddy's small voice traveled through the crack between the door and the olive carpet that needed to be replaced. That voice made it impossible for Chester to see his father any longer.

“Just go on down and give me a sec,” he said.

“Oh, Mooney called. She wants to know if I can come over this weekend, but she also said they have a snake hanging around the corn. Can you go by there today?”

“What kind is it?”

“Didn't say.”

“I already have two jobs today. They're just gonna have to wait.”

Teddy's feet tamped away, and Chester stood up. Above the bedroom door was a caduceus, modified with four rattlesnakes engraved into the wood to make a lowercase t.

“That's it. A lowercase t because it looks cool, but it's not a cross,” he said to the local craftsman, Benny L., years ago.

“Good, cause if it was it would be sacrilegious, and I'd have to refuse to make it.” Benny was strict about these things.

Chester kissed his index and middle finger and placed them in the center of the lowercase t, *cross*, then opened his bedroom door.

The door across the hall was standing open.

As his blood pressure began to rise, he reminded himself that he had to take the pill the doctor prescribed to him years ago. He rubbed his lips together and tried to remember if he left the door open or not. Was it Teddy? Little shit doesn't know the value of other people's belongings. Chester knew that he would never leave the door open. He didn't remember getting up last night, so it had to be Teddy or Gloria.

Chester walked quietly down the stairs and each board groaned under his feet. No one could hide in this house. Teddy's silverware clinked against the side of his plate. He was probably using a fork to scoop the remaining eggs into his mouth. If Chester had done that when he was a boy, his father would have popped him in the back of the head.

"I made eggs and toast." Teddy sat his plate down and gulped milk from a red solo cup.

"Say, Ted, did you go into my snake room and forget to shut the door?"

Chester walked to the cluttered circular table where his son had cleaned a spot big enough for the plate full of eggs and toast to go. His son was sitting a few feet away, head bent low like he was trying not to look up.

*

When Teddy woke up this morning, he thought it was going to be a good day, so he began cooking earlier than usual. His mom had taught him how to scramble eggs earlier that year but hadn't taught him to fry one—she was gone a lot, but Teddy was happy with the way his scrambled eggs turned out.

Then, he remembered that his dad only called him “Ted” when he was upset.

He wished his mom were there, but she was too busy working to support the family. Teddy couldn’t wait until he could work and make money so his mom could stop and take a break. She needed a vacation.

He sat down his cup and carefully swallowed. “No, I know better,” he said.

“But the door was left open,” Chester said.

“I heard you walking up and down the hallway last night. Maybe you forgot to shut it after checking on the snakes. Maybe—”

Before Teddy could finish his thought, his dad grabbed the plate from the table and pitched it to the linoleum. The hard floor made the plate break into three fragments. The sound of it brought tears to Teddy’s eyes. *Don’t let him see it.* His palms began to sweat as he curled his fingers, trying to get his knuckles to pop, something he did when he got nervous. *Do not let a tear come out.*

“Why would I forget to shut the door of *my* snake room? It’s the only thing I am proud of so why would I not shut it? What were you doing in there?” Chester’s voice turned dark. “Were you trying to take one out?”

Teddy gritted his teeth, but didn’t let them show. Another pop came from his index finger.

“No, daddy. I would never do that.”

Chester kicked the plate fragments across the floor. One poked the tip of Teddy’s big toe, but it wasn’t sharp enough to break skin. The look in his dad’s eyes was the one he saw many times, slightly slanted, but ready to spring wide. Teddy scurried to the mess and began picking up the bits of wasted food and plate shards.

Blue tiny pill, Chester thought, *Don't forget to take it*. In his head there was a faint rattling. "Get over here," he said as he unbuckled his belt and forced it around his waist. The tip of the belt whipped through the jean loops like a race car circling Talladega Superspeedway.

Teddy screamed and ran out of the kitchen, knowing whatever was about to happen would hurt. He wanted to go upstairs to his room, but something told him to head outside. He ran through the foyer and pushed the screen door open, all while hearing his dad behind him. He jumped off the small porch and fell to the grassy earth. Get to your feet, he told himself, but his father gripped the back of his shirt and pulled him backward and slung him into the gravel driveway. The rocks' pointy edges scraped his skin.

Chester picked his son up and tossed him over his shoulders. Teddy wiggled around in his large hands, trying to get free, but they were already back inside, going upstairs to the snake room.

"You wanted to come in here?" Chester said. "You wanted to come in here? Don't you ever come in here." Chester dropped his son and gripped the belt hard. It reminded him of his own dad, how Sherman gripped the Albino Timber Rattlesnake that his friend Merle handed him, the one that still had its drippers.

"Drippers," He said. How did Chester ever forget that? Drippers were what the church called the fangs. Sherman used the word at every church where he preached, but he said it for the last time when Chester was twelve years old.

"What is that?" Teddy used his left hand as a shield from the stone-cold expression his father was wearing. Sweat formed on Teddy's forehead—he was hot, and his hands began to shake, but nothing—his father stood there, doing nothing. Teddy

could try to run around his father, though a clean escape was doubtful. There was a window that led on to the porch roof, but that meant going around the tanks. He reached for the belt.

The leather burned through Chester's fingers, then he snatched the buckle.

"You lied. The devil is in you."

"Daddy."

"He lied and paid the price."

"Who?"

"Stand still."

"One lick for running." Chester raised his hand with the belt and then struck Teddy's legs.

"And another for trying to steal the belt." He struck his son on the stomach.

He raised the belt again. The rattling in his mind morphed into Sherman's voice.

"Chester."

The way he heard his name was heavy, almost like a warning. Chester looked around the room, but didn't see Sherman. He had always heard his father speak to him before. Usually, the voice was faint and muffled. Today, it was clear.

Teddy's skin pulsed. It was lashed red. Not only did he feel the blisters, he felt shame. How humiliating it was for him to be whipped like this. He was twelve years old. Spankings were for younger kids.

Teddy closed his eyes and allowed the tears to pour out. His dad drug him from the room into the hallway and slammed the door shut. He heard his dad's footsteps going down the stairs, the front door slamming, too, and the engine of the hand me down Honda

taking off. Teddy wanted to go back in and smash all the tanks with his baseball bat. He hated those snakes but hated his father more. The nightmares would be active for the next couple of nights, along with his mind trying to figure things out.

Why did his father always freeze whenever he whooped him?

Who was he talking about when he said *he lied*?

Would he have bruises?

How long would his skin burn?

*

As Gloria stepped on the gas, hitting another ten above the 35 MPH speed limit, she knew she wanted to divorce Chester. The first serious inkling of leaving him came when he demanded her sewing room for his snakes. That was a year ago. Her desire to disappear kept her awake most nights.

She had less than an hour to leave Thrifty Thrift's, go home and change, eat lunch, and be at Delightful Spot by one. She pulled into the long driveway, she saw that Chester was already gone for the day, pulling snakes out of unwanted places just to relocate them in another, and parked in the front yard. Sometimes, she contemplated driving her rusty Hyundai straight through the basement door, right into his damn viper pit. But, she reminded herself, the snakes in the basement were venomous. Fighting for her life from a snake bite was not something she planned on doing—nor did she have the time for.

In the yard was an off-balanced swing set perched next to the fence, an inflatable pool she put up last month, and the extra space. Hopefully, her friends would fill the

space this coming Monday for her party, the thing she had looked forward to ever since last Memorial Day ended. But she was nervous.

Last year, Chester caused a scene when Teddy's cat trotted up with a baby snake in its mouth. Of all days, it had to happen when she had company. Chester flipped over the chair he was sitting in and chased the cat down all while shouting curse words and flailing his arms like a toddler.

Nobody said a word about it after Chester stormed inside the house. He didn't come back out for the rest of the night. She knew everyone talked about her family when they left. It didn't matter if they were family, friends, or strangers. People talking about people made a small town a small town.

Gloria never saw the cat again after that day. Chester probably scared it so bad that it ran away. Good for him. She would, too, if she could.

As Gloria walked inside the house, she heard the dryer roaring in the laundry room.

"Teddy?"

He didn't answer her.

"Teddy?"

Gloria walked upstairs to find her son in the hallway. He stood in front of the snake room. The door was shut, but he was holding the baseball bat she got him last year. He didn't notice she was standing there.

"What are you doing?"

Teddy snapped out of whatever daze he was in and looked at her. When he turned, Gloria saw the bruise that covered his leg.

“What happened, Teddy?”

She slowly walked to him and carefully grabbed the baseball bat out of his hand.

“Dad thinks I left his snake door open. He spanked me this morning.”

“You should’ve called me at work.”

“I didn’t want you to worry, I’m okay, but I’m worried.”

“About what?”

“Dad.”

She wasn’t surprised, but she wanted to punch something, to punch Chester but he wasn’t there. She thought about skipping work and tracking him down. But they were already included in some talk of the town. Beating up her husband in someone’s driveway would make them the main topic of conversation across every church in Delight. It would have to wait.

If Chester were there with them, she could march into the basement or his stupid snake room and give him a whirl on the back of the head. Gloria gripped the baseball bat and eyed a picture on the wall—the one of them as a family when Teddy was two. Chester wasn’t the same back then as he was now. At least he was tolerable back then. *The glass would look good out of that frame* she thought. She decided against it once her son was still standing next to her. Gloria kept the bat in her hand just in case Chester showed up.

“I’m so sorry he did this to you. Let’s go make some lunch before I have to leave again. Go get the peanut butter and jelly out while I change clothes.”

This was the last straw. Her son was a good kid. He didn’t deserve a whooping or bruises.

Gloria wiped the tears on her way to the bedroom. She sat the bat on her bed as she changed into her diner uniform. That stupid rattlesnake cross above the door frame caught her eye. It taunted her as she started to walk out, but then she grabbed the bat from the bed and swung it. The bat's handle vibrated in her hand, and the cross stayed in place. She stood on her toes to see just how many nails Chester had put through it. The cross wasn't going anywhere. She debated another blow but didn't want Teddy to worry about what the sound was.

“Bastard.”

Gloria stopped before walking out of her room. Her hand still felt like fuzz when she realized she needed to hide the bat from her son. Quickly, she slid the bat underneath the bed and pushed whatever was underneath it further back.

Teddy had already made the sandwiches, so they ate on the back porch and swayed in the same rocking chairs she sat in as a kid.

“It's hot today,” Teddy said.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Do you like your sandwich? I can make you another one if you want.”

“No, it's okay. I can make one if I'm still hungry. I have to go back to work soon.”

Teddy dropped his face and looked at his bare feet.

“It won't always be this way, you know?”

“What, hot outside?”

Gloria wished she was talking about the weather, but it was about the long hours of being gone, the jobs, leaving him to stay at home with his dad, the spankings, and the

bruises. But twelve years old was too young for her to dump her problems on. Teddy was a sentimental kid. He would wear her troubles on his shoulders like a leather jacket. She wanted to wrap him in a hug, but didn't. She was still nervous that her sudden movements would cause him to flinch. Surely her son knew she would never hit him. She kept her hands tightly laced together until the urge to hug Teddy left.

“Yes,” Gloria laughed, “Fall will be here before you know it.”

“We're in Alabama, and it's hot in all the seasons.”

She laughed. “You're right.”

Gloria checked the time on her phone. She had thirty minutes to get to Delightful Spot. Then, she got an idea that would hopefully make Teddy feel better.

“I don't want you to spend the rest of the day alone. What if I dropped you off at Mooney and Turnip's and picked you up when I got off work tonight?”

He swallowed the last remaining bits of his sandwich and jumped up from the rocking chair.

“That would be fun. Mooney called this morning and asked if I could come, but Dad didn't say anything. She said there was a snake hanging around the corn, but Dad was too busy today to go over there.”

“Well, I'll take you if you promise to stay away from the corn.”

“Thanks, mom.”

“Go change your clothes while I take the plates and stuff in.”

Teddy ran downstairs a couple of minutes later. Gloria had to do a double-take when she saw him.

“Why do you have on pants? It's hot outside.”

Teddy looked down at the dirty Levi's that he coined as his "play pants" when it was Fall and Winter. After a few seconds, Gloria realized why he chose them.

The bruise.

"It's okay. Your play shorts are dirty anyway. Let's get in the car."

Gloria and Teddy walked out the back door, down the porch steps, and got inside the Hyundai. She blasted the air conditioner as soon as she started the engine. The cool air created a tornado of hair on Teddy's head. He was happy. Gloria was trying.

She was probably going to be late, but she loved her son more than anything in the world and wished that one day he could escape Delight before it sank its fangs into him.

She wished he could escape the snakes too. They were everywhere in this town.

As Gloria drove, she thought about how ridiculous it was for someone to have two rooms in the house dedicated to snakes. She could understand a grown man collecting things, and she was fine with his snakes at first. As Chester got older, his collection grew like he was trying to prevent age from taking away his passion.

Gloria had never seen or heard her husband pray. She couldn't blame him because she only prayed if she needed something. The last time she talked to God was a few months ago when she needed good results from a blood test. Her endless nights of pleading worked, and she knew she needed to get better with her faith. Her and Teddy used to go to church, but when the rumors began about her husband, they stopped going. Here in Delight, people used church as a social gathering to share gossip instead of a place to share the gospel.

The only fact about Chester that she knew was his longing for his dad. He had been Teddy's age when he lost his father, so maybe that's why he's been so distant these past few years. She was worried she lost her husband to his hobby, his addiction. At least he got paid sometimes to collect snakes.

Today, her husband had two house calls to make. Poor Joni had a problem with a chicken snake living behind her washing machine and dryer. The Morrison's had a copperhead close by. The only way she knew this was because she heard Chester take the call last night. The money he collected would go to buying more snake tanks, heaters, or even rats for the vipers to eat. He was invested in all that. She wasn't. Yes, he had changed over time. He used to be talkative during dinner and would help around the house, but as soon as he turned 34, he shut down. His stupid hobby got inside his head. Lord knows she tried to find a way to fix him.

She only wished she would've spent more time talking to Teddy on the drive to the Washington's instead of trapping herself in thoughts that usually came at night, but the bruises on her son's leg made it clear she had to do something.

*

The little girl, who, in Gloria's eyes, was the toughest little girl in town, was sitting on the front porch when Gloria pulled up. Mooney ran to the car as she rolled her window down.

"Hey, Teddy, Ms. Gloria!"

"Hey, sweetie. I bought him over to play for a few hours. I'll come pick him up later tonight. Tell your parents I said hello."

"I'll tell them you stopped by when they call."

“Oh, where are they?”

“They went to visit our aunt in Birmingham. She’s in the hospital. Me and Turnip are alone, but we’re alright. We know how to take care of ourselves.” Mooney stuffed her hands in her pockets and straightened her back as she walked closer to the car.

Gloria didn’t doubt that Mooney could take care of things alone. The ability to handle a situation spur of the moment was something that didn’t come naturally to most people. The older Gloria got, the less that drive ignited. The older Mooney got, the more it seemed to grow.

“Alright, well, y’all have fun. Call me at the diner if you need anything.”

Teddy left the car, but before they walked inside the house, he turned around and waved. It made Gloria smile. It also made her chest hurt. As Gloria drove away, she thought about the cookout in a few days. There were still groceries to pick up, but she could do that tomorrow.

For the past four years, Gloria hosted her Memorial Day get-together with family friends. Most of them were people she had met over the years while working at so many places in town. She loved to have conversations with people about vacations. Her desire to travel had been something her parents instilled in her. They had traveled to every state in the U.S. before they passed. Even though she didn’t take vacations near as often as Pat, one of her co-workers, she loved to listen to the details surrounding her trips. How the sand felt between her toes and how the salt water burned her eyes. She would go to the beach again one day. Hosting events like this gave her happiness and comfort, but she was tired of tip-toeing around her husband. One day she would throw a party without having to worry about Chester.

Gloria looked at her watch, two minutes late, and Delightful Spot was another three miles. If she lost this job, then she would have to look for another in one of the surrounding towns because this was it in Delight. She had already made her way through working at the car wash, the bank, and being a lunch lady at the school.

The radio station was on a string of commercials and ads, which she hated, so she turned the knob down to zero. Somehow, she thought she could focus better without the sound. As if turning down the chatter would get her to work faster. Moments later, when time was still lagging, she pressed her non-slip shoe down on the accelerator, inching 80.

*

Delight was keen on Chester for removing their unwanted snakes. For some reason, Delight had been graced with a heavy snake presence of all kinds. Nestled between Birmingham and Talladega, Delight was a sleepy town but growing. Chester could drive straight through in the time it took Brooks & Dunn's "Red Dirt Road" to play on the radio. The only music he truly liked was the sound his vipers made. The incessant vibrations of their noisy tails soothed him and made him feel at peace and closer to his father.

The rattling also made him think bad thoughts. He had gotten good at dismissing them, but he feared that he would act upon them one day. He hadn't been able to dismiss hearing his father so clearly this morning. He would do whatever it took to hear Sherman's voice again.

Today, Chester had to remove a copperhead from the Morrison's back yard. They lived a few miles from town, not quite to where there was nothing but farmland for miles. A copperhead would be great to add to the ones he already had, he was mainly on the

hunt for one specific snake, a rare Albino Timber rattler. However, he was not going to turn down a copperhead.

Once Chester pulled into the Morrison's long paved driveway, he parked a few feet from the carport. The lawn was perfectly mowed, and the flower beds were littered with roses, the exact opposite of Chester's house. There was an elegant crafted "M" sign hanging on the front door with sunflowers surrounding the letter, something they must've picked up at Homestead Hollow Arts and Crafts Festival. Jerry Morrison walked out of the two-story brick house and shook Chester's hand.

"Thanks for coming. We don't want the snake to get the kids or the dog. We've seen a copperhead over by the tree line, and Deb has sworn up and down that she keeps smelling cucumbers over in that area. That's a sign of a copperhead, isn't it?"

"Only when provoked, but I guess it's possible."

"Well, I'll have your \$50 ready for you when you catch it."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Chester, I've been meaning to ask you, but I haven't seen you in town much. What do you do with all the snakes you catch? Do you release them after you catch them? Do you kill them?"

Kill them? This made something in Chester's chest tighten. He believed they had a right to live just as much as any other creature.

"I would never kill a snake."

"So you take them to a state park or the Birmingham Zoo or something?" Jerry laughed.

"I release them in a safe environment, that's all."

“Okay, good. You know, we actually heard a rumor that you keep them in your house.” Jerry laughed again.

Chester stared at Jerry like a gargoyle.

“Well, I will be in the house. Just come on in whenever you’re done. But please leave the snake outside.”

“Will do.”

Jerry stepped away and walked hastily back inside. Chester began walking to their tree line, grazing the woods around him, and at one point, he began to call out *Here snaky, snaky, snaky*.

Thirty minutes later, he grinned when he found his new tan baby. He crept up on the copperhead as it was stretched out on a broken branch. Chester decided it might be a good idea to sneak up behind it to grab it by the back of the head. Then something moved him to grab the tail. The snake acted fast and tried to bite Chester’s stomach, but he held it a good distance away. He knew he could get bitten any second if the snake decided to strike again. Chester heard his dad’s calming whispers, “Gently, shhh, shhh.”

So, Chester whispered, “Shhh, shhh.”

Stephen, he thought. The snake's name was Stephen, and Chester remembered something from his childhood that made him grin. *Once you name a reptile, you have to keep them.*

After Chester placed Stephen in a brown potato sack, he then placed the sack inside a five-gallon bucket he kept in his trunk for these purposes. Jerry paid with a solid fifty-dollar bill, and Chester thanked him.

“I should be thanking you,” Jerry chuckled before Chester got in his car and drove away.

One thing about Jerry, Chester realized, was that he laughed too damn much.

Next on his list was Joni, a woman who ran the Delightful Baptist Church choir. This made Chester nervous. He knew she would try to convince him to join them for worship, and like always, he’d have to decline. People have been trying to get Chester inside a church ever since the last time he was in one, which was for his mother’s funeral when he was just shy of turning twenty. He had no desire to go back, so the four Baptist, two Pentecostal, and one Catholic church in Delight could stop pestering him about it. He wasn’t going.

The only church he would even remotely think about entering again was Delightful Devotion to Jesus Christ, where his father preached, but it was left to rot years ago. Occasionally, Chester would drive to it to walk around because someone bought the land and bulldozed the structure years ago.

As a boy, Chester liked going to church, but he loved hearing his dad preach. Sometimes it was odd for him to watch his father jump up and down and shout until red in the face. But something boiled and churned inside Chester every time the snakes came out, which meant someone was about to handle. He couldn’t tell if it was nervousness or excitement. At twelve, he felt comfortable around snakes while inside the church, but if he ran as fast as he could if he stumbled across one while playing in the woods.

He now ran to them instead of away.

Joni lived in a small house with two long chicken houses with shinning tin roofs in her back yard. Along with singing for Jesus, she raised and sold chickens for Tyson.

As Chester turned into her driveway, he heard the gravel spit and scream from under his tires. Joni met him on the front porch with a broom in her hand. She was waving it like someone trying to stop a speeding car from running a stop sign.

“Thank God, Chester, It took you just forever to get here. There’s now three of them stinkers behind my washer-dryer.”

He studied the woman, realizing just how much taller he was. The top of her head reached right under his ribs. He could tell she had been panicking. Her red lipstick was a little smeared with blots of it on her chin. Sweat covered her forehead. Anyone would be sweating on a May day in Alabama with snakes stuck in their house.

“I’ll get them.”

“Please.”

Chester stepped inside Joni’s little house and walked to the laundry room. He bent his body over the back of the washer and dryer and saw long bodies tangled up together. He already had a few chicken snakes in the bedroom across from his. One of them was named Mildred. He loved Mildred so much that he sometimes got her out of the tank and scrubbed her body with a toothbrush. Mildred seemed to like it but had tried to bite him a few times. She lived in a tank on top of Gloria’s old sewing table like a pedestal in a museum.

Chester tugged on the washer and dryer, moving them a few feet from the wall. He was able to wiggle his body between both machines and carefully grab the tail end of one snake. Joni watched as Chester pulled and pulled the snake out from behind the washer. *It just keeps coming*, Joni thought. It reminded her of a clown pulling a never-ending handkerchief out of their sleeve.

Chester wrapped the reptile around his arm and carried it out of Joni's house. Goosebumps hatched on Joni's skin. Watching this large man handle a snake with such care concerned her. She followed him outside because something told her to make sure he released it far away from her front door, but more importantly, her chicken houses. Instead of releasing it next to her porch, Chester placed the snake inside an empty five-gallon bucket, which was next to another bucket.

"Hang tight, bud," he whispered as he popped the lid down. He saw the snake squirming through the lid's punctured holes, trying to climb up the plastic walls, and falling back.

Joni could hear Chester murmuring something. She thought about his reputation and how people talked about the Davis family in town. As a Christian, it was her duty to rebel against the gossip and practice the gospel.

"You know, we would sure love to have you and your family over for church this Sunday." Even though Chester was from the South, he still picked up the way people pronounced certain words. Joni said "Sunday," but it came out "Sundee." His dad used to say it like that too.

"There's only two behind your washer," Chester said.

"Are you sure? I thought I saw three heads?"

"Yes, just two. Two long ones. Maybe one male and one female."

"Oh, great. My house is a love shack for a bunch of filthy worms. Okay, I'll get you some water. You look hot and sweaty. Oh, don't think I didn't notice you ignoring my invitation to church. It's good to have a church family. We will be there with open arms whenever you are ready to join us."

At this, Chester nodded, not out of courtesy, but for Joni to hush all the church talk. Some people just can't accept it when people say no. Joni quickly examined Chester's hands, at the roughness of them and the tiny scars that appeared from his knuckles all the way around and up to his forearms. She caught herself from staring too long once Chester began walking back inside the house to pull the second snake out.

This one was more aggressive.

It tried to bite as he fumbled with it behind the washer. Finally, he grabbed the snake behind its head and pulled it out with more force than he was comfortable with. Its skin pulling so tight that he thought the snake might snap.

Joni decided she didn't need to see Chester put this snake in his trunk, so she went in the kitchen to pour him a glass of cold tap water.

He admired the feisty nature of this one as he lowered it inside a third bucket. Then, he went back inside and began sliding the washer and dryer into their original places. Something caught his eye as he double checked the space. Three round shapes. Eggs.

Chester sighed because he knew the second snake must've been the mama. Joni met him in the laundry room, "Don't you worry about moving those back. My nephews will be here later to do it." She handed Chester a fifty and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"It's hot as Satan's fingertips out there. I put your water in this solo cup for you to take with you. I'm sure you have more...jobs to do today. Thanks again, Chester."

Chester figured he would let these snakes go. While the venomous have their own unique stories to tell, the regulars seemed to tell the same story every time.

He wondered if he should tell her about the snake eggs, but Joni was already inside with the door shut. Chester drove away, stopping halfway down Joni's driveway. After a minute or two, he got out of the car and sat the buckets on the gravel. He opened the lids and gently pushed them over. The first snake slithered out and slithered toward the edge of the road.

He positioned the second snake, the mama, toward Joni's house and watched it disappear into the grass, hoping it would make its way back to her eggs.

*

"Let's go outside and do something," Turnip said as the kids sat on the couch and watched tv.

"It's hot. What if we just stay inside and finish the movie." Teddy liked being inside Mooney and Turnip's house. He had been over so many times that he knew exactly where everything was.

"It's getting to be dinner time. I can order a pizza if y'all want something," Mooney said as she stretched and yawned.

The living room was an open area with a big flat-screen TV. It was different than what Teddy had at his home. He never knew where to look while watching the huge flat screen. His eyes always wandered a little to the left. At home, all he had to do was look in the middle of the TV since it was a much smaller screen.

"There ain't no pizza places that deliver all the way out here." Turnip stood up and walked to the kitchen.

"Well, there's leftover barbecue chicken and potato salad in the fridge."

“I hate leftovers. Who wants to eat the same damn thing you just ate the day before?” Turnip opened the fridge and grabbed a Coke can from the top shelf.

Teddy began laughing. He always found it funny when Turnip said a bad word. He knew they were mature for their ages, but he didn’t want to say a bad word, not yet anyway. Teddy didn’t want to disappoint his mom.

“Just get it out of the fridge and we can eat it later. I guess we can go out for a walk before it gets dark. Teddy, are you not hot in those pants?” Mooney also stood up and stretched.

“Oh, no, I’m good. My shorts were dirty. A walk is good.”

“Let’s go play in the creek,” Turnip howled from the kitchen.

“You know the rules. No playing in the creek and no playing in the corn without mom or dad home. Plus we saw that snake this morning.”

“They ain’t here. They won’t know. And that snake was so ugly. I never had seen a snake like that before.”

“I told my dad about it, but he was busy today.”

“It’s okay. We didn’t see it after it disappeared in the corn. Maybe it won’t stick around. We usually get snakes out here, but they normally just slither back to where they came from. Does your daddy still keep the snakes he catches?” Mooney asked.

Teddy hesitated. If he told them the truth, then they may think differently of his family. One time, months ago, they were playing hide and go seek in his house, and Mooney tried to open the snake room door, but it was locked. Teddy remembered Mooney asking why the door was locked, so he had to make up an excuse. *It’s where*

mom keeps my birthday presents, even though his birthday wasn't for another three months.

He decided to give them a fraction of the truth

"He collects some of the safe ones. He keeps them as pets like, you know, how some people have pet snakes they get from the pet stores?"

"Oh, that's kinda cool. People say he keeps some of the venomous ones locked up too. But we don't believe that," Turnip said.

Teddy didn't want to give his dad the recognition. He also knew that his friends didn't know about the collection growing in the basement.

"Do y'all promise not to tell anyone about this? People in town already think we are weird. I don't have anything to play in the creek in," Teddy popped his knuckles. Mooney watched him.

"It's safe with us," Mooney smiled.

"You can roll your jeans up like our dad does sometimes," Turnip said.

Turnip knew to stop talking when Mooney scowled at him.

"We'll just walk around the farm. No big deal." Mooney winked at Teddy.

Teddy smiled. Somehow, Mooney knew when he needed her. All the questions about the snakes made Teddy feel flushed. The air conditioner kicked on, and the cool air dispersing from the floor vent beside him cooled him.

He wasn't mad that his friends asked questions about his dad. He knew they were curious, but he hoped they never found out about the basement. He took a deep breath before standing up. He felt the clean air enter him.

They left the house, avoided the corn and creek, and enjoyed the sunset as it colored the sky. Teddy felt happy to be out of his house and with people who cared for him.

He didn't want to go home.

*

When Chester got home for the night, Teddy wasn't watching re-runs of *The Wheel of Fortune* in the living room, and Gloria, thankfully, had already left for another late-night shift at the diner. Chester fumbled through the kitchen and searched for something to eat. There was nothing. Usually, Teddy would have something ready for them by this hour. Annoyed, Chester grabbed an apple from the pantry.

He went to the basement with the apple in one hand and the sac that held the copperhead in the other.

Chester looked around at the row of a dozen five tier storage shelves. The only light came from the bulbs above each tank. There was also an electric heater plugged up, on the highest setting. He had to make sure they were kept warm, just how they liked it. A while back, Chester told his wife and son they were going to have to get used to the heat. They adapted like any other animal on the planet.

He heard the holy rhythm of the rattlers as he tapped on the glass of random tanks.

"Hey, hey," he said and felt something warm disperse in his chest.

It was cozy, familiar, and wanted. The rattlers were hungry. They were waiting.

Chester finished the apple while still holding the sac. He took Stephen to the bottom shelf at the far end of the basement and dumped the copperhead in the empty tank

and turned on the lamp above. The tank had a blanket of trimmings on the bottom, fake leaves and twigs, and some greenery that he picked up from a pet store in Guntersville a while back. It was the only one around that had a variety of stuff he could use.

The snake coiled. Chester made sure to place the lid on before bending down to stare the snake in the eye from the other side of the glass. Stephen struck the glass, and Chester jerked back. Venom ran down the pane like snot on a school bus window.

“You’ll learn not to do that again.”

The snake slithered to the back of the tank as Chester walked away. He saw the snake’s behavior as disrespectful.

Chester sat on the stool that faced the tanks and looked at his collection. The longer he sat there, the harder his heart raced, and the more he felt the rage. He pulled out the tiny notepad and pencil that he kept in his breast pocket and wrote *Stephen* on a new sheet of paper. He flipped back through the previous pages, re-reading some of the names he had given to snakes over the years.

Burt, Alf, Eve, and Mark.

As he remembered the different snakes, he breathed better. Still, he went back upstairs and took one of those blood pressure pills out of its bottle.

He called it a night after he swallowed it.

*

About an hour later, Gloria and Teddy arrived home. When she picked him up from the Washington’s, she found the kids asleep in the living room. Mooney and Turnip’s parents were still not home, so she figured she would call them tomorrow to check on them.

Teddy fell asleep in his bed almost immediately. He didn't even think about taking a shower. Surprisingly, he didn't dream about his dad towering over him with a belt, but instead about him and his father on a beach, Gulf Shores, swimming in the ocean. His mom was standing on the shore talking to strangers and sipping on a drink. Then, she walked away with them, leaving Teddy in Chester's care. Before he knew it, a rip current was pulling him. He called for help, but his dad had walked out of the ocean, holding something in his hands. Teddy saw increments of his dad wrapping something around his neck as he bobbed up and down between the waves.

It was a snake. Long and nasty. Teddy screamed before a wave slapped him in the face and filled his mouth with salt water. His dad wrapped the reptile around his head and wore it like some Halloween mask that was supposed to scare instead of trick. Slowly, Teddy watched his dad fade into a small dot miles and miles off the shore. Teddy's fingertips wrinkled. The salt water made his lungs burn as they filled.

Usually, he woke up before he got severely hurt, but this time, he sank into the ocean's darkness. All the burning finally ceased by the cold water.

Teddy twitched his head as his eyes moved under his eyelids. He couldn't get his arms to move. A nightmare, he told himself, wasn't real even if it seemed so believable.

*

Gloria could hear Chester snoring from inside their bedroom. The idea of sleeping next to him tonight made her sick, so she decided to sleep on the couch. How could she let a man bruise her kid like that? He had no right to do that regardless if Teddy had left the door open.

She knew that it was Chester. If only he had asked her first, she would've told him that she saw him get up and walk out of the room well past midnight.

The house was quiet as she walked back downstairs to see one small piece of pizza left on the pan. Even though it was cold, she ate it anyway. The house was a mess as she walked to the living room. The walls were lined with random objects like boxes, clothes hampers, and stuff Teddy brought out from his room. It could be worse, there could be snakes drooping from the ceiling fan, wrapped around the lamps, and nesting inside the couch. The thought of that made her want to burn the house down.

Perhaps she would.

But not tonight, not when her son was fast asleep in his bed. Gloria pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and checked some voicemails she had received while at work.

Bill collector.

Aunt Juanita who needed money.

She wished she'd never let Teddy convince her to get a flip phone.

Times are changing, he said last year. *You need a phone since you work so much.*

Somehow, between the bills and basic needs, she managed to keep up the payments. Then again, she was not working two jobs to keep money flowing through. Yes, the money was needed, and it helped, but she was working two jobs so she didn't have to see her husband. She thought that maybe she should save up and get Teddy his own phone for emergencies, especially after what happened.

She stretched out on the couch, still in her diner uniform that smelled of spilled coffee, and thought about the first few months she spent with Chester.

They were good, fun, filled with excitement, but even in those early days, there was a distance in his eyes. One morning he woke her up, his eyes drooped like he didn't sleep at all. He wanted to drive down to the Florida Everglades that weekend. Gloria was up for the spontaneous mist that fell upon her husband, but they never made it over the Alabama state line. Gloria forgot her wallet on the nightstand filled with all of their credit cards and cash. Chester didn't speak to her the whole drive home and almost a week after they returned. Instead of grabbing the wallet and still high tailing to Florida, he locked himself in the basement, where at the time, all of his snakes lived.

He was always addicted to something other than her. Always loved something else more. Still, to the day, she couldn't remember why she stayed with him all these years. She had to love something about him, and perhaps that was Teddy.

Gloria knew the story about Sherman, but she also lost her parents at a young age, and she was able to move on.

Some people just grieve forever.

*

The next morning, Gloria snuck into the bathroom. Chester was still asleep, but all she wanted to do was punch him until he woke up. She decided against it and got in the shower instead. Minutes later, she dropped the shampoo bottle, which probably woke him. At least she hoped so. Most mornings, she was up and ready to go by 7:30. However, today, she was early—she wanted to leave as soon as possible.

She stared in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. Her brown hair was developing some gray at the top, which she expected. She was only 36 years old, but her own mother was using boxed hair dye by the time she was her age. The grey didn't bother her, she

liked the signs of getting older. Perhaps she would keep the grey to remind Chester that he was the reason.

From inside the bedroom, she heard him moan, probably stretching, after he realized she was not next to him.

She took a deep breath and walked away from her reflection.

“I saw the bruise you left on Teddy.” Gloria sat at the bed’s edge and began slipping on the black shoes she had to wear at the Delightful Spot.

“He lied about being in the snake room. He should know it’s not right to lie.”

For some reason, Chester’s voice was always deeper when he first woke up. He sounded like a giant stuck in the earth. Gloria shook her head.

“It was you. I heard you get out of bed. It doesn’t surprise me that you forgot. You’ve been so distracted these past years. Teddy is 12. The next time you lay your hands on *my* son, you will never see him again. I’m going to work. Don’t bring a snake home today, either.”

“You’re gonna tell me what to do in my own house?”

“What are you gonna do about it, huh? Hit me? And it’s my house. Belonged to my parents.”

“Yeah, you always like to say that.”

“Well, it’s the damn truth.”

In her usual routine, Gloria would put in her best pawn shop earrings made of green glass, but not today. Earrings would only slow her feet from running out the door.

“You know, I don’t think we need to have a Memorial Day party this weekend. Our yard isn’t in good condition for company yet.”

“Nice try. It’s happening, and you know it. It’s happening with or without you.”

“It seems like you would prefer me not to be there.”

Gloria faced Chester. The phone rang from downstairs.

“If you’re gonna keep acting like a jackass then maybe I don’t. Chester, you’ve changed over the years. Not to mention your stupid collection. It’s growing. How many snakes you got now? Close to 40? What are you gonna do if DHR comes out here and finds that many snakes sleeping in the room right next to Teddy?”

“You need to get your priorities straight. I’m sick of you acting selfish and childish.” Gloria stood up from the bed and caught Chester eyeing his makeshift rattlesnake cross thingy, ignoring her.

“Unbelievable. I meant what I said. Touch Teddy again, and you’re gone.”

Gloria walked out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and out the front door. Teddy was sitting on the porch steps, reading one of his books.

“Have a good day, Teddy.” Gloria kissed the top of his head. She thought that this could be the perfect opportunity for them to leave Delight forever. She could tell him to get in the car, and they could drive until they met the Gulf coast.

“You too, Mama. See you at dinner.” Teddy raised the book back in front of his face.

She had ten minutes to get to the diner. After driving halfway down their long driveway, she stopped and gripped the steering wheel. She fumbled with the gear shift.

This would be the perfect moment. She could back her car to the front porch, tell Teddy to pack a bag, and they could be out of Delight. But she would have to leave her childhood home behind, in the hands of Chester. And there was the party. She would

have to give it all up forever. Maybe her son would rather stay in Delight with Mooney and Turnip. She looked in the rearview mirror and saw Teddy propped against one of the steps, face buried in the book. She could write the Washington's a letter, begging them to take him in so he wouldn't have to be with Chester. They would understand.

No. She couldn't leave her son behind. Gloria removed her hands from the steering wheel, wiped her forehead, and swiped the hair out of her eyes. Teddy needed her. He didn't need to be abandoned by both parents.

She, however, did deserve a lifetime of sadness for thinking about leaving Delight without him.

*

Chester laid in bed, stiff as a neck after a sleepless night. He was another day closer to Gloria's dumb party. Last Memorial day, Teddy's ugly golden cat trotted up to the back yard with a dead baby snake in its mouth. He got so mad that he went inside for the rest of the night. When the cat returned home later that night, he mixed rat poison in the cat's food. He never told Gloria or Teddy, but he did it to protect the precious snakes that he hadn't found yet, more importantly, the ones that hadn't found him.

He would do the same to any animal Teddy brought home if he needed to.

From downstairs, the landline rang again. Three separate calls now. Chester figured it was either a bill collector or one of Gloria's friends. Of course, Chester was not going to make it down in time to answer it, so he relied on the machine to get it. As he strolled out of his room, he opened the door across from his, walked to a tank that was sitting on Gloria's old sewing table, and collected Mildred from the bottom.

He wrapped her around his neck, feeling her scaly pulse.

“Let’s go get us some breakfast.”

Chester’s legs seemed to enter the kitchen before the rest of him did, and his slow gait made the hardwood break into a symphony of squeaks. *No hiding in this house*, he thought as he slid two pieces of bread into the toaster and began brewing coffee.

Moments later, he poured himself a cup. No sugar. No creamer. In many complicated ways, and despite Gloria’s opinions, he saw himself as a simple man, but just like his toast, burnt to a T. He bit into the charbroiled bread, placed Mildred on the kitchen table. The only light in the room was from the sun peering through the window above the sink and a little lamp on the table, dim enough to create cloudiness but bright enough to see. The snake slithered across his Styrofoam plate and blocked the second piece of toast. Chester wiped the crumbs off his mouth and stroked Mildred’s body with two fingers. As he brushed her, he thought about what life would be like if his father were still alive.

He probably wouldn’t be petting a nine-inch rat snake that he found living in a bale of hay. He probably wouldn’t even have the slightest inclination to collect snakes. Perhaps he would be religious like his daddy, but maybe not. If there was a God in Chester’s world, then he could not see him. Sometimes all he could see and feel was darkness.

However, he always saw and heard his dad in every snake.

The reptile made the plate snap underneath its body. Chester chuckled while sipping his coffee. Mildred rose her black head and laid it on his shoulder.

“Aw. You want some loving don’t ya.”

Chester picked up the snake and wrapped it around his neck like a hosepipe drooped around a rack. The muscles in Mildred's stomach moved over him and made him relax. He wished he could do this with the venomous ones.

“Oh, yes,” he whispered.

The snake didn't stay wrapped around his neck long. If he wanted to feel intense pressure, he would have to find some constrictors, but there weren't any of those in Delight, Alabama. He would have to go to a zoo or the Florida Everglades. After he petted Mildred's head, he reached for the second piece of toast, and she dangled from his right arm.

“Still good.”

*

The day went on, slow and boring, as summer days usually went for Teddy. He had read a few chapters in a book he borrowed from his 7th grade teacher before school ended a month and a half ago about Zeus slinging thunderbolts and Medusa getting her revenge. Normally, he would've already devoured the pages, but chores and other things seemed to come first these days, especially with his mom staying gone more than usual and his dad lost in his snakes.

The bruise on his leg was still there, beaming with life, reminding him to avoid his dad at all costs today.

In the front yard, Teddy walked through the tall grass. Some weeds were already up to his waist. If his mom was going to throw a party this weekend, then he ought to push mow the yard, but that was a job that would take hours. Maybe he would just cut to the fence line, it was still a fair distance, not as far as to the road—someone with a riding

lawn mower would have to tackle that. And they usually did, but his parents hadn't called the Garrison boys to tend the lawn in almost two months. They were falling behind.

Teddy walked to the back yard and pulled open the wooden shed door. Inside, was the rusty push mower that his mom bought at a pawn shop up in Scottsboro years ago. He decided he would cut the back yard first because it would take the least amount of time. After, he would take a lunch break and then tackle the front.

He hoped his mom would be proud that he did it all by himself. He couldn't wait until the party this weekend because his mom made the best homemade banana pudding.

There was still gas in reservoir. The oil looked good, too. He pulled the cord and the push mower started and he began to walk in straight lines until the day wasn't such a waste after all.

*

"Give me two scrambled eggs, a large hash brown, and two chocolate chip waffles," the bald man who sat at the counter said to Gloria. "Oh, a sweet tea, extra ice."

"Coming right up, Mayor Riley." Gloria stuffed her notepad into her apron and walked to fix the man's drink.

The diner was busier than usual today. Must be the summer heat encouraging people to get out of their homes and into places where the A/C felt better. This is one of the many reasons Gloria didn't mind her diner—the air and the constant swirl of people who had actual conversations. The time away from Chester was also nice.

"You coming to the party this weekend?" Gloria asked Pat who was scrambling eggs.

"You know I am. Your parties are the best."

“Well, remember it’s a potluck. Bring your own food.”

“What about bringing your own bottle?”

Gloria laughed, “Well if you’re drinking, then yeah.”

Pat put her hand on Gloria’s shoulder. “I don’t know why I forget that you don’t drink.”

“It’s not my go-to.”

“Then what is?”

Gloria stopped wiping down the bar’s surface with a soapy rag. She didn’t know what her go-to was. She remembered this morning and how she almost left Delight forever.

Escaping.

The sun glared in through the windows and caused her to close her eyes for a second. When she opened them, she saw her husband’s car stopped at the red light just outside the diner.

Gloria mumbled, “Where the hell you going?”

“Order up,” Pat shouted.

*

Chester hated stopping at the red light outside of Gloria’s work. He bet a hundred that she would question his whereabouts tonight when she got home. Maybe she would sleep on the couch again.

The town was too damn small, but that was all he knew. He hated the city. Nothing was there for him but car horns and broken sidewalks busy with people that seemed to all be asking themselves the same question—what the hell am I doing here?

He enjoyed the country, the breeze the wind brought in the afternoons, the snakes hidden in some hay or under a rock. He couldn't find that in Birmingham, and there was the zoo, which he loathed. It was mostly jealousy, how the zoo had the boas, pythons, and anacondas, while all he had was the ones in Delight.

Chester was driving to the church he grew up in, well, at least the land where the church once stood on. Delightful Devotion to Jesus Christ wasn't there anymore. He wanted to drive there anyway, wanted to feel the land under his worn New Balances.

When he pulled into the empty lot, there was still a for sale sign sticking in the dirt. The lot was away from town, and if you didn't know someone who knew about the land, then it would be impossible to find.

He got out of the car and walked over a pile of rubble from when they bulldozed it down years ago and stood where the pulpit would be. He imagined a full house with familiar elderly faces—all of them dead now like his father, who was buried in an unmarked cemetery about thirty feet away.

Chester walked over and ran his index finger across the top of the headstone as he walked around it. He bent down and cleaned the dirt and grass covering his father's name and the years of his life.

Sherman was a man full of faith who believed in the power of snake handling. The church was a good distance from town. It had to be that way because snake handling wasn't exactly in high demand, especially to the Baptists. People would come from all over the state to hear Sherman preach. Other churches even invited him to be a guest preacher, just as long as he brought his snakes.

“All it takes is for them to come and see. Once they feel the power of the Rattlers, they’ll know!” Sherman said every time he got an invite, every time someone in his congregation mentioned law enforcement lingering nearby. In all the years Sherman preached at that small, run-down church, he had been bitten thirty-one times. Thirty-one times he turned his eyes from God. Thirty-one times God reminded him.

Delight was even smaller back then with only a few gas stations and a locally owned BBQ joint called Fatties in the downtown area.

Chester knew his father’s church better than any of the other kids in the congregation, how the small space could pack in over a hundred people, and still be big enough for the spirited ones to dance in the aisles. The windows were not stained glass like the Baptist people had. Instead, they were spray painted a dull frosty white from the outside, which prevented anyone from eavesdropping during a service. People in Delight were not stupid, they knew this church existed, but it was what happened behind those blurred out windows that caused them discomfort.

The earliest memory Chester had of watching his dad battle a snake bite was when he was eight years old. The snake, an Eastern Diamondback, sunk its fangs into his father’s wrist, and Chester didn’t know if he should get up to help him or not. Sherman, just like every soul who handled vipers, refused medical treatment. Instead, he called his congregation forth and they gathered around him, placed their hands on his body, prayed.

Lord, push him through.

Heal him.

Lord Jesus, give him comfort.

The fact was, his father belonged more to the people of the church than his own son. While the church members always thought God healed his body, Sherman and his best friend Merle knew it was because they orchestrated the snake handling to be safe. They defanged some of the rattlers they loved to use. Merle and Sherman were the only two people to handle the fang-less ones because they were devoted. It was the congregation, slim and blind as there were, who needed to be truly tested.

Once when Merle told his father that someone might be suspecting them of defanging the rattlers, Sherman shrugged it off, saying “If the Lord persuades them to come to us about it, then we will pray, and let them take up a serpent, perhaps one that still has its drippers.”

Merle used to make everyone laugh. White trash humor was what his mama called it. Cancer took her before the church took Sherman.

The sun beamed Chester’s shoulders, but he was used to the heat.

“What do you want me from me?”

He waited a few moments as sweat began to pour down the side of his face.

“Dad, I don’t know what this means. But I feel it. I feel it. He wiped at the sweat. Say something to me. I’m listening.”

Two squirrels chased after each other and ran up a pine. Then the quiet slipped back over everything.

Chester got back into his car, he gave the empty lot one last look, drove back toward Delight. He didn’t have any snake jobs today, so there was nowhere else to go. He kept to the country roads just outside of town, walked around the wooded area behind Kids Palace, the local playground, and then ended his tour at the lake.

Boats sped by him in the distance, watching him stand on the edge of the pier.

He wanted to jump in to see how fast he could sink, if he could go deep enough until there was no bottom to reach.

The rattling inside his mind flared up.

“Not yet, son,” Sherman said. “It’s not the right time.”

*

Hours later and back at home, the sun was close to going down. The grass was fresh cut and made him sneeze, but he didn’t see Teddy in the yard or on the porch reading. The phone was ringing as Chester walked inside and dropped his keys in a small bowl on the kitchen’s windowsill.

He picked it up. “Hello?”

“Mr. Chester.” It was the familiar voice of a girl.

“Mooney, what do you want?”

“Mr. Chester, that rattler is back, and it just got Turnip on the ankle. It’s swelling bad. He’s in bad shape, screaming, and stuff. Our parents are gone in the car. I don’t know what to do.”

Chester rolled his eyes. Children these days need to be taught how to treat a snake and a bite properly.

“Mooney, just don’t move him until I get there. Try to get your brother calm—”

“There it is. Just came up on the porch. Thing won’t leave us alone. Looks yellow, or is it white? Bastard. I’m gonna shoot it.”

“Mooney, listen to me. Is the snake albino?”

“I’m gonna shoot it, Mr. Chester.”

“No, don’t Mooney.” It felt as if someone had folded the kitchen into a paper airplane and set it into flight. “I will be there in ten minutes. Do *not* harm that snake.”

There was a thud on Mooney’s end. Then, a gunshot.

It traveled down Chester’s ear, hit him in the stomach, his knees. He shook and hit the floor. His hands glided the hardwood until the base of the stove blocked them from going any further. A sound escaped his mouth. It wasn’t just a groan. It was a scream.

*

Teddy walked in from putting the push mower back into the shed. Grass covered his arms so he headed to the wash to dust them off. But his dad was on the floor, arms stretched out, like some weird yoga pose he saw in infomercials late at night. Before he could help, his father screamed, and Teddy stepped back. He’d never seen or heard his dad do this before. In the corner, the rat snake slowly slithered to Chester’s fingers. He took a few more steps back, afraid the snake would slither over to him and bite if his dad told it to. His dad whispered, almost too low and choppy to understand, “Do not harm that snake.”

Chester balled his fists and stood up, face red and sweating. Teddy knew that face. It was the same one his dad wore whenever he whooped him. However, this face transformed into something scarier. It was more pinched, the eyes were animalistic, and Teddy knew his mama wouldn’t approve of whatever was going to happen next.

*

“Get in the car, Ted,” Chester said and grabbed Mildred. He ran upstairs to put her back in the tank.

When he returned, Teddy was still standing in the same spot.

“I said get in the damn car!”

Chester fumbled around the kitchen table, throwing pieces of newspaper and mail around.

“I don’t want to go,” Teddy said.

“I ain’t got time for your shit right now, Ted. Get in the car before I drag you there myself.”

“I want to call mom.”

Chester grabbed the phone line and yanked it out of the wall. “What the hell is she going to do? I’d like to see her try to do something.”

The keys were in a bowl perched on the windowsill. He could not remember putting them there, but he figured he had to be the one to do it, just like when he left the snake’s door open last night. He snatched them out, knocking the bowl into the cluttered sink below.

“Damn it, Ted.”

Chester grabbed his son’s arm and pulled him through the kitchen, foyer, and eventually outside.

“Where we going?”

“Mooney’s.”

“Why?”

Chester opened the backseat door and shoved Teddy in.

“Buckle up,” he said. His son wasn’t much of a fighter, but Chester still wanted to make sure he didn’t try to escape.

Teddy thought about running away—he could break for the woods and run until he reached the neighbors. They were too far, and his dad would catch him. He did as told and latched the seatbelt.

Chester settled himself into the front seat and sped off. The afternoon sun made both of them sweat, but Chester refused to turn on the air, even after his son asked him twice.

“Can you please turn on the air?” Teddy asked a third time.

Chester remained quiet. The only sound was the engine humming fast and the water bottles sloshing around in the backseat floorboard.

Teddy never really liked his dad’s car. It smelled like stale peppermint and sweat. There were always five-gallon buckets with lids full of holes in the trunk for the snakes. They were rolling into each other hard. The sun was so sharp, it gave Teddy a headache. He tried to avoid looking in the rearview mirror at his father.

Inside Chester’s mind was the crashing sound of rattling almost too faint to hear, but loud enough to make itself known. “Go,” is what Chester heard in the rattling. He lowered his foot on the gas.

Every once in a while, Chester glanced at the rearview mirror to see if a cop was following with his blue lights on. He had finally found the albino snake. He had planned to put it in a special tank and to take its venom. Then, Chester could try to start over.

But that wasn’t going to happen now.

*

A church in West Georgia invited Sherman to be a guest speaker at their annual revival. Merle traveled with Chester and his father because they never went to another church without him. It was supposed to be a fun trip.

The church, Home of Salvation for Jesus Christ, was about the same size as Delightful Devotion to Jesus Christ, but they had more windows and actual instruments—a drum set, guitar, and piano. Chester was only used to a track playing through the speakers. Occasionally, someone brought in a guitar to play, but music wasn't Sherman's priority in a service.

Stand-up fans in each corner provided faint air conditioning. It was impossible not to break out in a sweat, not with a full congregation. Chester looked around—this was the biggest crowd Sherman had ever preached for.

On the front row sat Sherman, Chester, Merle, and the box. Merle passed them peppermint from a tin in his pocket. Then, Sherman was introduced by the third preacher of the night. As he watched his father carry both his Bible in one hand and the box with the albino snake in the other, Merle waved another piece of peppermint in his face.

Merle ate when he was nervous, and so did Chester. They had been to revivals before, but this time just felt different. It must have been the crowd.

Sherman wiped the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief and sat the box beside the dingy plywood pulpit.

“Hey, y'all. Thanks for having us. My name is Sherman Davis. If you would turn to the book of Mark. Chapter 16. Verse 18. Let's remind ourselves why we are here.”

After Sherman read the Bible verse, he felt comfortable enough to preach for another thirty-five minutes before motioning for Merle.

“See, the snake here is God.” Merle took the lid off the box and handed Sherman the snake carefully, like a newborn baby. “It’s God testing us. These here drippers, right inside the serpent’s mouth, well, that is the devil. That is the punishment for sin. It’s also a vessel to purify yourself. At the end of the day, it’s up to you to decide.”

Merle stood at the far corner of the stage. He had told Chester he wished to be a preacher like Sherman one day, instead of just being in charge of de-fanging.

The snake’s rattler drowned out the fans. The other serpents from their boxes in the corner, used from the previous preachers, also started to make their sound. All of the rattling sounded like a choir harmonizing on their favorite hymn.

Chester flipped the peppermint around in his mouth and his heart began to pump blood fast as his father flailed the snake around like a cowboy’s lasso.

“We shall seek salvation,” Sherman shouted, and Merle made eye contact with Chester. Both were amazed at the way the albino’s rattler set off the other snakes.

Sherman switched the albino from his left hand to his right. It was time for him to answer to his sins.

“I’m going to end with a prayer. A prayer that I say every night before going to bed. Lord, thank you for giving me the gift of spreading your word.” Sherman brought the snake closer to his face, and Chester felt something make the air inside the church hard to inhale. A fever came over him when Merle’s eyes turned from half-crescent to a full moon. Something was wrong.

“Bless me and my son with good health, and please forgive—”

A lady in the back screamed as the serpent struck Sherman on the neck. Then, the crowd gasped in unison as the snake let go and bit Sherman again, right under his left eye. After he tossed the snake to the ground, blood oozed at the surface of the wound.

Merle ran to Sherman, praying and shaking. He helped Sherman to the floor. The congregation and the other preachers stepped up to the pulpit and made a prayer circle around Sherman. Chester sat on his knees as the Albino slithered out from the crowd and under the pew. Once the snake was out of sight, he jumped down and to his father. He squeezed in between the bodies, but God had already left the room. His father clutched Merle's hands.

"The drippers," he said.

His father had failed the test.

At that moment, Chester knew it was the devil who made that snake kill his father. The devil was powerful, could douse an entire church in something evil instead of holy. And a darkness hatched in him, one that only a snake could nurse.

That same darkness was back with him, riding shotgun.

*

"Daddy, It's really hot back here," Teddy said.

The inner rattling rose louder and muddled his son's words. The tires left pavement and bounced on dirt.

It was a miracle that Chester arrived at the Washington farm without wrecking or running into a mailbox. He had swerved a few times, which made Teddy shout from the backseat, but he didn't care. He didn't even mind the boiling sensation he felt as it began to overtake his body.

Chester parked the car at the edge of the cornfield that was at least 20 feet from the Washington's front porch. It was a traditional farmhouse with a wraparound porch and a pasty white coat of paint on its exterior. It resembled something from a horror movie about a possessed scarecrow or demented children hiding behind the crops. He stood outside the front door and waited to see if he could hear any sign of the kids.

Teddy unbuckled, got out of the car, and fell to his knees. The sudden heat made him weak and nauseous. He'd kill for a glass of water.

Chester paced the porch steps. Then, he heard a faint yell coming from inside the corn.

He darted past his son into the high green stalks. He ran as fast as he could until he got to a dead end. He turned right and made his own walkway. Every turn and row of corn looked the same.

He heard another yell, closer.

"Help, we're here." It was Mooney.

Chester knocked the corn down. Flies buzzed around his crimson face. All he could think about was the snake.

Where was his snake?

*

Back at the car, Teddy stood up and walked to the front porch and let himself in. He knew exactly where the kitchen was, and he reached for a glass out of the cabinet, watched as the faucet poured fresh water into his cup. The entire glass was gone in one gulp. The dishes from the leftover chicken and potato salad last night were still in the

sink. Mooney always hated chores, but she did them eventually. It looked like their parents hadn't come home yet either.

He looked around the tidy kitchen and saw a spotless kitchen table with nothing on it but a bouquet of fake sunflowers as the centerpiece. He had eaten with Mooney and Turnip and their folks many times, but he didn't know what it was like to eat with his own family. Perhaps he would ask his mom if they could.

Teddy walked down the small hallway that connected the kitchen to the laundry room.

Inside, he saw the screen door was cracked open.

*

"Where are you?" Chester cried out.

"Here." Mooney answered, thinking Chester was asking about them.

He wasn't.

Finally, Chester saw a clearing in the field ahead of him, and two small bodies sat in the dirt and corn silk.

"Look." Chester could hear Turnip say before his sister turned around.

As soon as Mooney turned, Chester grabbed both of her arms and jerked her up into the air.

"Where is that snake?" a droplet of spit hit Mooney's forehead. She was so close to his face that she could smell the black coffee on his breath.

"Put me down." Mooney tried to wiggle her way out of his grip, but it was too tight.

"Mr. Chester, help. My foot is swelling." Turnip cried below.

“The snake is on the porch, around back. Please help my brother.”

Chester dropped Mooney. She tumbled to the side and landed in a large patch of corn silk and stalks.

“Bastard got me good. I need to go to the hospital.”

“Did you call the ambulance?” Chester bent down and looked at the boy’s swollen, puffy foot.

“I was gonna, but I called you because I know how you are with snakes. Then the snake came up on the porch. It’s almost like it followed me to the house.” Mooney brushed the dirt from her bare knees as she stood.

“Mooney, did you kill my snake?”

Chester stood erect and towered over the girl. His shadow enveloped her. For the second time that afternoon, she felt fear. She kept her eyes focused on his, dared him to do something other than help her brother.

*

Teddy decided to walk to the back door since Mooney and Turnip were not in the front yard. He figured they might be in the corn, but he wouldn’t know why. They normally didn’t play in the corn because their parents were afraid of them getting bit by something or the possibility of them getting lost.

Teddy stopped walking as soon as he opened the back porch screen door. There was a hole shot through the wooden floor. A few feet away, laid a headless snake, but not one he had ever seen. It was white with tints of yellow. A shotgun was also laying a few feet away from the dead snake.

Then, it made sense. His father came here to collect a snake. But why did he run into the corn? And why was the snake back here? Was this the snake Mooney called about just the day before?

Turnip was shouting a string of bad words from the front yard. Teddy grabbed the shotgun and opened the back porch door. He walked inside the laundry room and carefully sat the gun in an empty clothes hamper. He knew Mooney's temper, but he also knew his dad's. Back outside, Teddy jumped off the back porch steps and ran around the big house. His father emerged from the corn with Turnip thrown over his right shoulder. Mooney was slowly walking behind them

His dad had turned into a monster. He could see it in the way his friends were being handled but also in that blank and twisted facial expression. Teddy wanted to cry, not thinking twice about letting his dad see the tears. He felt a churning in his gut that made him think something bad happened in the corn.

Chester took a deep breath. He dropped Turnip to the ground. Mooney ran to his side and tried to help him up, but stayed on the ground. Teddy ran over to the kids and examined Turnip's snake bite.

"Teddy, get in the car."

"No. What happened?"

"I need to find it. I need something sharp." Chester began to look around the front porch, scattering the rose bushes around, looking.

"Help me, Teddy. I got bit by that damn snake on my foot. It hurts like hell."

"We need to get him to the hospital, Dad."

Chester walked up the front porch steps and stared at the kids.

“Help me, Mr. Chester, please. My lips are startin’ to feel weird.”

“Come on, Mr. Chester. We need to go.” Mooney hovered her hands over Turnip’s foot like her palms had healing powers.

The same piercing silence fell upon the farm, nothing but the wind rustling the hair on top of their heads and the sun lightly burning their skin. The rattling inside Chester’s mind shook a little louder.

“Make this right,” Sherman said.

“I have to make this right,” Chester said as he searched the front porch area.

“You didn’t have to hit me so hard,” Mooney said and rubbed her cheek.

Chester left the kids in front of the car and followed the wrap-around porch to the back of the house.

“Your dad is weird,” Turnip said as he shut his eyes.

“No, don’t go to sleep.” Teddy looked at Mooney. “What were y’all doing in the corn?”

“We were just going for a walk. We know we ain’t allowed in it without our parents, but we thought it would be fine. Then, the snake bit Turnip so I ran to get my dad’s shotgun. I didn’t want to leave him in the corn alone, but I didn’t have a choice,” Mooney said.

“Mom and dad are gonna be pissed when they find out.” Turnip’s speech was slow.

“I think they will have other stuff to worry about. Teddy, maybe we need to put him in the car, get him out of the dirt,” Mooney said.

A few seconds later, Teddy could hear a loud howling from the back yard. His dad had found the albino snake. Why was he so upset about one stupid snake?

“He’s pissed. We got to get out of here,” Turnip said.

“I know. Hold still.”

*

Chester heaved as he climbed up the back porch steps.

“Oh, no.” he fell to his knees next to the dead snake, picked it up, and held it to his face. The body twitched against his cheek.

“That’s the one.” Sherman’s voice buzzed in his ear.

“I’ll never understand,” Chester said.

“Make it right. Make *them* understand.”

“He’s my son.”

“And you’re mine.”

Chester lowered the snake back to the ground. In the far left corner of the yard was a shed. Sherman stood in front of it—he looked the same as the day he died. His asphalt black hair was slicked back. He had on a long sleeve button up with the sleeves rolled up to his forearm. Suddenly, Chester felt twelve again and began tasting peppermint. Chester walked toward him.

“Do as I say.” Sherman disappeared when Chester opened the shed door and stepped inside.

He fumbled around the shelves and saw many different tools. A hatchet, hacksaw, an electric saw, and buried underneath a burlap pile was a chainsaw with rusty teeth.

Chester lifted it from the ground, but something caught his eye before he walked out. A brand new axe leaned against the wall. The handle was long and yellow.

The axe head shined through the shed's dimness. The chainsaw made an ugly *thud* as it landed on the shed's wooden floor. Chester ran the blade across his fingers. It was ready for chopping.

He walked back to the porch and picked up the albino snake. Its head was missing, but the body still twitched as he laced it around his neck.

Chester waited for his father to reappear, but the only thing he heard was Turnip screaming from the front yard.

*

"Maybe we should leave," Mooney said.

"Where would we go?" Teddy looked around.

"If we cross the creek, we can make it to the Flynn's in no time."

"I don't know if I can make it that far," Turnip groaned from the ground.

"If we both carry him, we can leave now. Your dad probably doesn't know about the creek. He wouldn't know where we went."

Teddy hesitated. He knew what Mooney said was true, but he was scared. He also knew that he would be in deep trouble if his dad caught them.

"Okay. Let's go before he comes back."

Mooney and Teddy lifted Turnip. Each kid drooped one of Turnip's arms around their necks and began walking to the creek, which was flowing rapidly just a short walk beyond the tree line.

When they reached the trees, Teddy looked back. He never should've.

His dad was already walking toward them, carrying something. Whatever the object was dangled in Chester's hand, almost like he was dragging it through the ground.

"Faster," Teddy said.

Turnip cried out as Mooney and Teddy hauled him through the wooden path.

"We're not gonna make it," Mooney sighed.

"I can hear it," Teddy said. He could feel the coolness that came off the water.

They were getting close.

"Come back here," Chester yelled. The axe fit perfectly in his hand. Perhaps he would keep it for himself. He watched the kids reach the edge of the creek. All he had wanted was his snake. Now, he had it, but it was dead and draped over his neck.

Sherman leaned against a tree on the opposite side of the creek, "You need to go faster."

The kids were waist-deep in the water, slowly trudging across. Something made them stop.

Mooney pointed to the side of the creek they needed to climb up. "Shit, it's higher," she said. "How are we gonna get up that before he gets us?"

Chester slid down the bank and water filled his shoes as he stepped on stones.

"You can't." He sliced the water's surface in a rowing motion as if the axe were a paddle. "You're in big trouble." Chester was just a few feet away.

Turnip dropped his head.

"No, Turnip, stay with us," Mooney cried.

"He's dying. Let us pass," Teddy said.

Chester stood in the creek and faced the kids. The water was cold as it seeped through his jeans. He *could* let the kids go back to the house. There was nowhere for them to go, so they would be his regardless.

Turnip's head fell forward, unconscious. The venom and loss of blood were destroying him.

"What are you doing?" Sherman said.

"Stop it." Chester shouted.

"Finish it."

"No."

"Don't make me tell you twice."

The water's current made Teddy and Mooney waver as they tried to keep their balance in the middle of the creek. Chester lunged toward them. He grabbed a handful of Turnip's hair and began pulling. Teddy and Mooney pulled the other way, but the sudden jerks made Teddy fall. The water carried him a few feet downstream. Mooney was still latched on, screaming, "Let him go."

If Mooney didn't want to let her brother go, then she would have to come with them. Chester was pulling violently, trying to get them out of the water.

As the current carried Teddy, he tried to bury his hands into the creek bed. Once he got a grip, he held tight to the rocks underneath the surface. He tried to find his footing so he could stand and walk again.

Finally, Chester pulled Turnip up the bank, and Mooney lost her grip from her brother's wet leg. She face planted the mud but quickly jumped up as Chester dropped

the boy in the mushy earth. He waved the axe in front of him. The tip of the blade barely missed Mooney's face as she tried to climb up.

"Give me back my brother. You're sick." She knew that for sure. Sick in the head and sick everywhere else adults could be sick at. She tried to leap from where she was standing, but Chester pointed the axe her way.

"You ruined me. I'll never be free from this."

Mooney climbed up the bank, but Chester forced her down into the mud. He raised the axe above his head like a lumberjack.

Teddy watched as Mooney was inches away from Turnip. It almost seemed like his dad was aiming for her, but the blade sunk deep below Turnip's swollen ankle, inches away from the snake bite. His dad gave the axe handle a shake.

Mooney screamed. Teddy shivered in the creek.

His dad raised and lowered the axe down a second, harder time. Turnip's body slightly bounced in place like a bowling ball dropping from a clumsy hand.

Teddy heard the steel make contact with bone, and it reminded him of someone stepping on a branch in the woods. Despite the sound the creek made as it flowed, the splitting and cracking of bone was louder. Teddy looked away and began walking out of the water. He fell to his knees once he climbed up to where Mooney was laying.

Chester was studying Turnip with that same emotionless smirk he wore so well. Blood oozed through the mud, glittering in the sunlight. After a few seconds, the blood began dripping off the edge of the creek bank.

Mooney was howling like an animal, face down in the mud. She began hyperventilating as Chester picked her brother's foot up like an expensive porcelain

figurine in an antique store. She tried to suck in air, but her throat was beginning to close up.

“Get in the car.” Chester pointed the foot toward the two kids.

“Or you’ll be hopping on one foot like him.”

“Mooney,” Teddy whined as he bent down to see if she was okay. He helped her stand up, but then something in his stomach clenched. He turned around and vomited.

Neither kid could find the instinct to run away again. Shock gripped them. Mooney’s legs were shaking as she tried to stand.

“You’re gonna pay for this.” Mooney looked Chester deep in the eyes, mud covering her forehead.

“To the car. Now.”

Mooney knelt beside her brother and tried to feel around for a pulse.

“I’ll take you myself.”

He bent down to pick up Mooney, but she lunged and pushed him. Chester slapped her backward. She didn’t move once her head hit the ground.

Snot dripped out of Teddy’s nostrils and leftover bile seeped from his mouth as he watched his dad toss the foot into the creek. It floated away as Chester bent down to grab Mooney’s foot. He also grabbed Turnip’s—the one that was still attached.

“Get in the car, son.”

Teddy couldn’t find the strength. All he could do was walk in front of his dad. He didn’t look back but could hear his dad’s grunts and groans as he walked behind him along with thuds coming from Mooney and Turnip’s bodies bouncing on top of broken sticks and patches of weeds.

Chester tossed Mooney inside the trunk. She began moving around, slowly coming to. When she opened her eyes, she saw the crystal clear sky with no clouds in sight. After a few seconds, the sun was blocked by Chester. He was holding her brother in his arms. Turnip's head dangled, and blood poured from his wound. It wasn't until then Mooney realized where she was and what happened.

Chester pitched Turnip inside the trunk. He landed on top of Mooney, who tried to get out of the way, but was too late.

"Teddy, help," Mooney said before Chester slammed the trunk shut.

"Ted, you get in the backseat."

Teddy opened the back seat door but stopped before getting in. He saw his dad's face quickly glance at the passenger side like someone was there. Chester hovered the axe above the center console, hesitating. Then he sat the axe in the passenger-side floorboard. It was too long to lay flat, so he propped it up.

"Where are we going?" Chester whispered.

"Home," Sherman said from the passenger seat.

Teddy buckled his seat belt, wondering if his dad was talking to him or himself. The way Chester's face glided to the side and frowned after a few moments told him not to question it.

Mooney's eyes began to adjust to the darkness. She smelled the creek water and mud on her and Turnip as her hands stretched out around her. The world felt upside down as she laid in the trunk, wet, and with the worst headache of her life.

She placed her hand on Turnip's chest, which was moving up and down, but he was not awake. She was glad for that.

“Time to go.” she could hear from inside the car.

Teddy closed his eyes, hands resting on his legs. *Please be home early, mom.* He repeated it over and over as they drove.

Mooney screamed, kicked, and fumbled around the trunk the entire ride. She felt around for any type of weapon she could use.

She tried not to touch or fall on Turnip. Nausea, along with the pain she felt in her head, made her want to vomit. Mooney gently rubbed her temples, hoping the pressure would cease the pain.

“I’m going to make sure he pays for what he did. Just please stay with me.”

She tried to trace herself back through the events that just happened, but it was all just fuzzy confusion. Her mind felt like white noise on an ancient TV set.

Things were going to be different for Mooney and her family now. Blood probably stained the grass. She and her parents would probably never walk to the creek again. All she wanted was for her brother to be okay.

Mooney knew the only way out of this was to cooperate with Chester, but she had a hard time accepting that. She felt like she had to fight, if not to save herself, but to avenge what happened to Turnip. Darkness filled the truck as she continued to feel around for something to defend herself with. Her hands glided across the buckets that were rolling around. In the far corner, she felt the rough plastic of a grocery bag. When she reached inside, her fingers brushed against what felt like a tee-shirt.

She grabbed it.

She took her brother’s leg and followed the skin until her hand touched the end of Turnip’s ankle. Gently, she raised his leg and tied the tee-shirt just below his shin. She

remembered watching a war movie with her dad when a character tied something over their wound.

“Hang tight, Turnip.”

After tying the tee shirt into a knot, she felt around until her hands touched a thick rope-like object. She followed the rough surface until her fingers touched the cold claws of the jumper cables. She held them in her hand while she searched the rest of the trunk.

The car made a sharp turn, which caused a bucket to slam into her leg. She thought about reaching inside, but there was a lid on top of it. She shook it instead. It didn't sound like anything was inside but air.

She knew about the emergency lever some cars had, and if Chester's had one, it was either cut or hidden. The cables would have to do, so she gripped her small hands around each clamp. The heavy cable was twisted around her arm like an anaconda. Her hands shook as the realization set in. A snake was what caused the ruckus tonight. It caused Turnip his foot. Even though the odds of him losing it were high, it could've been in a hospital, not on a creek bank.

She wished the snake Chester wore around his neck would regenerate so she could be in her bedroom right now, sleeping. She wished she would've never taken her dad's shotgun from his gun cabinet. She wished she never followed the snake as it slithered around the wraparound porch, to the back. She should've let nature be nature and waited for the ambulance instead of calling the local snake guru.

He was insane.

The car came to a sudden stop.

The trunk door flew open, and Mooney sprang upward and dug the jumper cable teeth into Chester's skin. She managed to pinch him just below his breast pocket, and as she pulled the clamp jaws down, she ripped the material. A tiny spiral notebook flopped to the ground.

"I've had it with you." Chester pried the cables out of her hand and threw them in the dirt.

"You better hope my brother lives." Mooney's voice was low, which angered her. She wanted it to come out as a shout.

"I stopped the venom from spreading." Chester stood in front of her, axe resting on his shoulder.

"You took off his foot."

"Are you going to get out or am I gonna have to carry you like a baby?"

"Where's Mrs. Gloria?"

"You ask too many questions."

"My parents will be home soon. They're gonna know it was you."

"Let them come for me."

"You're crazy."

"We're going to the basement."

Mooney climbed out of the trunk. She had been over to Teddy's house a few times but her sense of direction was skewed. Like her, they lived in the middle of nowhere. She had to fight for her brother, who was losing blood in the trunk.

Teddy opened the back seat door and ran to where she was standing. He hugged her tight, and the gesture made her head pound.

“You okay?”

“You look like you’re going to pass out.”

“I’m so sorry about Turnip. I’m going to call my mom as soon as we get inside.”

“We’re not going into the house. We’re going to the basement.”

“Why?” Teddy looked at his father who still had the lifeless snake around his neck.

“Just do what I say.” Chester slowly wobbled past the two kids and motioned them to follow him to the back of the house. “Come on now.”

“But he will die in the trunk.” Mooney stood still.

Chester shrugged his shoulders and motioned again for the kids to follow him around to the backyard. He didn’t know what he would do once he got them inside the basement. Perhaps he would sit them down and tell them everything. Or he could make them sit in the basement with the vipers until they gathered enough respect for them, make them wear one around their necks or around their wrist like custom jewelry.

“Extraction.” Sherman was standing by the basement door.

Chester unlocked the door and ignored his father. The two kids were following. The wonderment on their faces caused him to smile. His son and Mooney hadn’t seen the viper collection since he kept both entrances to the basement locked—the door leading to the kitchen and the one from the outside.

“It’s true,” Mooney whispered.

“What?” Teddy looked at her like he didn’t know what she was talking about.

“The rumors. We never believed that he kept this many. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Don’t touch anything.” Chester walked deeper into the basement, almost disappearing in the shadows.

“What are you doing?” Mooney asked. Her hands were shaking.

“It’s what I’ve been looking for.”

“Dad, what’s going on?” Teddy began walking closer to him, but a chorus of rattling filled the room like a group of babies synchronously waving their toy around.

Chester remained silent. He walked over to a shelf and leaned the axe against a storage cabinet, and then opened one of its drawers. As he reached in, he collected a glass Bodrum beaker with a special type of rubber clingwrap molded to the top of it. After, he brought it to the center of the room where a barstool sat. Instead of sitting, he sat the glass container down and eyed the row of rattlesnakes in front of him.

Which would be the lucky one?

He bent down and studied a seven foot Eastern Diamondback named Dennis. Nine months ago, Chester found it behind a Baptist church. They paid him \$50 along with an invite to the potluck they were having, but he only accepted the cash.

“Please steady my hand,” Chester said with his eyes shut.

“You got this. Just hurry,” Sherman whispered in his ear and put a hand on his shoulder.

When he opened the lid, Chester saw Dennis laced into a coil. His eyes had vertical slits of rage.

Normally, he collected snakes with his bare hands, and he had suffered many bites throughout the years, but none from a venomous snake. The sticky air was throwing

off his momentum with his snakes. He hadn't felt that sensation since he watched his father die.

It must be the children, watching and judging, but it could also be Sherman, also watching and judging. The sweat on his body turned sticky, a reaction only the darkness that was inside him could cause.

"Mr. Chester, tell me what we're doing here, or I'm leaving," Mooney said and walked closer.

"An Albino Timber is very rare. I've been looking for it for years now."

"Well, you found it."

"And you killed it."

"Why do you keep all these snakes? Something's not right with you Mr. Chester," Mooney waved her hands in the air.

"God, why are you so damn nosey?" Chester said.

"You beat me up, cut my brother's foot off, and God only knows what you've been doing to Teddy."

"It's not God who knows."

"Dad, what is that?" Teddy pointed to the glass container on top of the barstool.

"We're gonna do a little experiment."

"I don't think you're gonna have time to do much of anything. Once they find Turnip, my daddy will come for you, and so will the cops," Mooney said.

Chester looked at her with disgust. How could he even manage to look at her in the first place? She killed the solution to his problem. He wished he cut her foot off instead. What was that saying he heard all the time from his father?

A tooth for a tooth? An eye for an eye? A kid for a dead snake?

He walked to the corner of the room and picked up a long, rusty reptile hook. It had belonged to Sherman, but Chester hadn't used it much over the years.

He preferred his hands.

But not tonight, not with this heavy feeling on his shoulders. He couldn't pinpoint the sensation. He never thought he would experience that same feeling he had at 12, the same age as his own son. Did Teddy also feel the evil? Did he feel God leaving his soul the way God left him?

Perhaps the version of his father that was seeing now wasn't the same Sherman he grew up with, but a malignant one who wanted him to do bad things.

Maybe the albino snake wasn't what he needed to have for the rattling in his mind to stop, for the urge to collect a creature that spawned sin in Genesis. Whatever it was, he didn't have to obey it. He needed to.

He opened Dennis's tank and reached the hook inside and pulled the long, thick golden brown body out. Without thinking, he reached down and grabbed the snake on the back of the head. The animal whipped its lower body back and forth. Its tail curled between Chester's legs. He motioned for Teddy to walk closer.

"I don't wanna, daddy. I'm scared."

"You're scared? You feel it? You feel how it rips you from the inside?" He brought the snake's head to the side of the glass beaker. The snake opened its mouth and chomped through the rubber surface.

"That's the devil. I haven't felt this since I was your age."

"Felt what?"

“The fear of watching someone I love die.”

“Your dad was bitten by a snake?” Teddy asked.

“Right in the neck. And his eye.”

“That should’ve made you scared of snakes,” Mooney said.

“Teddy, come here.”

“No, that thing is huge.”

“I want to show you something.” His dad smiled at him.

Teddy knew he would get a spanking, or worse, if he didn’t obey, so he began to walk to the middle of the room. He wished his dad would turn on a light so he could see. Something in his mind told him that a snake could slither over his feet at any moment.

His dad seemed happy that Teddy was about to touch a snake. He wondered if this was what a connection felt like. He never felt one with his dad before, and he didn’t want this to be the first.

“Teddy, don’t.” Mooney reached out to try to stop him, but she didn’t dare step any closer.

“Give me your hand,” Chester said.

Teddy obeyed. Even through all the horrible things that had happened, he watched how the snake was relaxed in his father’s hold.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“I don’t know.”

Teddy was mere feet away from the large snake, and he didn’t know who he feared most, his dad or the animal.

“I’m going to teach you something.”

“You’ve never taught me anything before.”

“Now, listen. Take your fingers and place them around the edge of Dennis’ head. Squeeze gently.”

“What if it bites me?”

“I got a hold of it.”

“Teddy, don’t do it,” Mooney shouted.

“Shut your mouth.”

Teddy placed his fingers on each side of the snake’s head. Liquid poured from the fangs as his fingers moved up and down. The venom floated at the bottom of the beaker.

“Those are his drippers.”

Teddy remembered how his dad said drippers yesterday before he spanked him, “His teeth?”

“No, his fangs. How does it feel?”

“I don’t feel anything.” Teddy removed his fingers and backed away from the snake.

“I guess you don’t have the gene then. My father had it. I have it.”

“Is that why you collect all these snakes?” Teddy asked. “Because your father did?”

“He didn’t collect the snakes as much as I do. He used them in church.”

“Why in church?”

“It’s just what people like him believed.”

“Do you?”

“I only believe in my snakes. The plan was to get the venom from an albino.”

“Why?”

“To take as much as possible.”

While his dad removed the snake’s head from the beaker, Teddy thought about how little he knew of his grandfather until now. He could see the reason for the lines on his dad’s forehead. They flexed every time the snake wiggled in Chester’s hands. The snake’s rattles echoed in the basement while Chester put Dennis back inside the tank.

He carefully collected the beaker from the stool and walked over to a small table across the room. He flipped on a lamp that provided the basement dim lighting and pulled out three syringes from a rusty filing cabinet next to the heater.

Mooney began to slowly walk backward. Teddy turned around and saw her motioning him to come with her. He wanted to go so badly, but for the first time in his life, he was getting answers. If he ran now, he might trigger his dad to act violently again. There’d been enough hurting for one day.

Between the lamp and the bulbs above the tanks, the lighting only covered one wall of the basement. The rest of the space was dark, perfect for an easy escape. Even though the kids stood in the shadows, they watched Chester dip the needle end of each syringe into the beaker. After, he put each one in the back pocket of his jeans. He treated each syringe with care, he didn’t want to drop them.

His fever felt a swoosh of cool air tickling his neck. Mooney had opened the basement door and darted out as soon as Chester turned around.

Teddy was also gone.

Chester grabbed the axe and jogged up the stairs that led into their kitchen. When he walked to the window above the sink, he saw the kids talking to each other behind the car.

“Do something. Your snakes are waiting.”

Chester ran back downstairs. In the corner, he grabbed two five-gallon buckets and stood in front of the snakes. Some were hidden in their tanks. Some were pressed against the glass, ready for Chester. He reached for the snake hook, but Sherman raised his voice, “You don’t need that. Hurry.”

“Yes, sir.”

*

“I need to call for help,” Teddy said as they both reached the trunk. He was relieved when he saw Turnip inside.

“The first thing he’ll do is go in the house. He’ll catch you.” Mooney reached into the trunk and felt her brother’s neck.

“We can’t leave him out here because he may try to mess with him again.”

“We don’t have much time. Just go in and call for help. I’ll stay here with Turnip. I’ll try to hotwire the car.” Mooney began walking to the driver’s seat.

“You know how to do that?”

Mooney opened the door. She looked back at Teddy and didn’t say a thing.

“Okay, yeah. I’ll call for help. Honk the horn or something if I need to get out of the house.”

“Be careful,” Mooney said.

Teddy smiled at her before he ran toward the front porch. He didn't know if hotwiring the car would work, but he had to move.

The afternoon sun gave Mooney just enough lighting to work with. She wondered what was taking Chester so long to run after them. Had he injured himself? Was he giving up? That was doubtful.

She looked in the center console for any type of tool she could find, but there was none. There were also none in the trunk—she would've felt them earlier. She tried to use her fingers to pry open the compartment under the steering wheel, but something made her pause.

“I've got a surprise for you.” It was Chester.

She locked the doors and eased down into the seat.

“I can see you.”

And she could see him. He had the axe snug under his left arm and he carried two dirty white buckets. He sat them in front of the trunk.

“Looks like your brother is in pretty bad shape. It's a shame that the snake took his foot,” Chester said.

You took his foot you sonofabit—before Mooney could finish her thought, Chester pulled something out of a bucket.

The snake squirmed in his hand. Slowly, Chester placed it on the back windshield. The snake slithered slowly across the glass. It was the copperhead that he collected from Jerry's house the day before, Stephen.

Mooney stared at him from the side mirror, making sure he didn't drop a snake inside the trunk.

“Here snaky, snaky, snaky...”

Chester made his way around the car and waved a rattlesnake back and forth like a pendulum. He bent down to be eye level with Mooney and then reached for the door handle. The expression on Chester’s face when the door didn’t open made her grin.

“Where’s Ted?” Chester’s breath fogged up the window.

She remained silent and watched him lace the rattler on the roof of the car. She didn’t know where the other one had slithered off too because it was no longer on the back windshield.

She reached over and began rummaging through the glove compartment. What she didn’t see was Chester raising the axe.

*

Once Teddy was inside the house, he locked all the doors. The floorboards creaked with every step as he ran to the kitchen.

He grabbed the phone, but he couldn’t get a dial tone. He remembered then that his dad had yanked the phone out of the wall, and he went over, tried to plug it back in.

A loud crash came from outside. Out the window, he saw his dad toss the axe to the ground before gently feeding a snake through the busted window.

Teddy ran as fast as he could to the stairs. Once on the second level, he opened the sewing room door and ran to the window that overlooked the front yard. He unlocked the latches and raised it, screaming, “Leave them alone.”

*

Mooney managed to crawl to the backseat before pieces of glass spewed through the car. Some landed in her hair and some cut her as she struggled to get as far away as

possible. Chester slammed the axe a second time through the window, knocking the remaining glass out of the frame.

“Want some company?”

Still holding the axe, he fed a snake through the window.

Mooney couldn't tell what kind of snake it was, but she heard and saw the rattling as it began. She reached for the door handle, then stopped when she turned to see one of the other snakes slithering down the other side of the window. She was trapped.

“I wouldn't make any sudden moves if I were you.”

Mooney sat as still as she could while the snake curled itself around the headrest, positioning its head eye level with her. Fists clenched, she got ready to fight.

*

Teddy saw his dad bent over in front of the driver's side window. Then, he saw him reach inside the bucket next to him. Right before Chester pulled another snake out, Teddy looked around the room.

Tanks were to his right, so he reached over and picked one off the shelf. He took the lid off, but almost dropped the tank. He managed to get a tight grip on the sides before tossing it out the window. The tank stopped sliding before it reached the porch roof's eave.

The long chicken snake that was inside slithered out onto the roof.

“What the hell are you doing? Don't you dare touch another one.” Chester's voice echoed throughout the yard.

Teddy grabbed another tank. This one wasn't as heavy. He knocked the lid off and threw it out the window. The fake leaves and pebbles flew through the air. The snake remained in the tank for a few moments.

"Leave them alone." Teddy held another tank out of the window.

"You messed up." Chester's face was red from screaming as he walked to the trunk and picked up both buckets.

"Watch this."

He dumped the rest of the venomous snakes inside the trunk. The snakes slithered over Turnip.

"Get them out of there. Turnip's gonna get bit again," Teddy shouted.

"You get away from him." Mooney tried to turn around, but the coiled snake in front of her kept her still.

"I'm comin' for you. You get out of my snake room," Chester watched as a rattler opened its mouth and bit Turnip's arm.

Teddy tossed the tank he was holding. It stayed on the roof with the other two. Thank god his son didn't have a good pitch. But the snakes slithered in different directions, trying to escape.

Chester ran to the front door only to find it locked. He fumbled in his pocket for the keys and pushed through the door, hearing it slam against the wall as the hinges went for a ride.

Once in his snake room, he didn't see his son inside. Out the window, his snakes were slithering off the roof, falling to the ground.

Chester ran out of the room. “Teddy, come on,” he said into the hallway. “I know you’re in here.”

As he walked, he patted the three venom filled syringes in his back pocket.

“You need to hurry up,” Sherman growled.

Chester felt like Sherman was sticking to him like a fly in wet concrete.

“These kids ain’t making it easy. I’m tryin’.”

Chester tried to shake away his father’s voice, but he felt Sherman’s grip tighter than ever before. Through the exhaustion, he pushed open his son’s door.

*

Gloria had just taken her last order of the night. Her shift was going okay, but she was distracted, was thinking about what the people in Delight would say if she had left this morning.

How can a woman walk out on her family like that?

She had to do what she had to do. Her husband should’ve saw it coming.

Why did she choose the Gulf?

She could’ve taken her son with her. How low and wrong. Hell’s waiting for that one.

The last thought bugged her. Of course, she would take Teddy with her when she left.

Her thinking about leaving him behind was just the devil trying to mess with her. How could she even think that? Life without her son wouldn’t be worth living.

Someone jerked the diner’s door open in a hurry. She heard swift footsteps approaching the bar.

“Gloria, I just passed your husband.” Joni stood behind the counter. “It looked like he was wearing a snake around his neck.”

“What? When? Was Teddy with him?”

“Just about five minutes ago. I was heading to the Pig when he drove past me. He was heading back through town. Did you not see him?” Joni said.

“No. Was Teddy with him?” Gloria asked again.

“He was and he didn’t look good. He looked like he saw a ghost and wet. He looked wet.” Joni shrugged.

“You know, I told him that we would love to have y’all join us this Sunday. But that snake around his neck. That’s not right.”

Gloria walked away from Joni and grabbed the phone beside the register. As she dialed her house number, Joni climbed a stool at the bar. The phone just kept ringing.

Gloria turned around and looked at Pat who was pouring re-fills.

“Go. Check on your boy. I got this.”

Gloria walked out from behind the counter. “Thank you for telling me.” Gloria briefly brushed Joni’s shoulder as she ran out.

*

Mooney sat as still as she could, waiting to see what the snake was going to do next. In the front, she saw one of the copperheads that Chester placed on the car slithering inside. They knew. They knew where to go to escape danger, but she was stuck.

She needed to get to Turnip. She heard Teddy yelling from the house and felt something make the tail end of the car slightly bounce before Chester took off running.

She opened her mouth to yell for Turnip, but then stopped when the copperhead disappeared in the front seat floorboard.

Mooney tried to watch both snakes at the same time, but even with the sun still out, there was still some parts of the car that were not fully lit.

The yard would've been silent if it wasn't for the rattling of the snake in front of her. The rattler inched through the air with its upper half while the lower half wrapped around the headrest. The split tongue peaked out of the snake's head as it made circles in the air.

She turned her eyes to see if the snake was still slithering across the window beside her. When she didn't see it, she slowly reached to unlock the knob on the door. Then, she slid two fingers inside the inner side of the handle.

The snake coiled back, resting its entire body on the top of the headrest. For a moment, she thought she felt something glide past her feet, but she didn't feel anything after that. She was too focused on the rattler to look down to see.

Get out of the car, she told herself and flicked her wrist and opened the car door. The snake revved back and lunged toward her but hit the back of the seat as Mooney slammed the door shut. She hit the hard gravel, which made her head pound.

She shook the rocks off her elbows and ran to the trunk. A blanket of rattlesnakes and copperheads covered her brother.

"Turnip, can you hear me?" Mooney stood with her hand over her mouth, keeping the rage down, but it began boiling deep inside her stomach.

Between the dark patterned bodies and the triangular heads, tiny streams of blood oozed from fresh bite marks.

She wanted to reach in and grab her brother, to pull him out of that viper pit, but she also wanted Chester. Mooney wanted to watch him crawl in pain, to pay for what he did.

A snake began to slither out of the trunk, and she jumped back and saw the axe lying in the grass a few feet away. Mooney sprinted to it, picked it up, ran as fast as she could to the front porch.

*

The rattling in Chester's head grew louder.

Like always, each step on the staircase creaked under his weight, but tonight was different. The squeaks were sinister.

He was off the staircase when he heard footsteps running into the house. Mooney. She held the axe in her hand like a professional.

"Now, children," Chester said. "I can play all night."

Mooney contemplated running toward him with the axe, driving it through his skull, but from what she'd witnessed tonight, Chester would win that battle. He was bigger. She was faster.

She ran into the kitchen and Chester laughed.

There was the pantry, but she figured he would look there first. The house was still fairly lit, so visibility wasn't on her side.

She wanted Chester to chase her. Footsteps tamped above her. It must be Teddy because Chester was already trailing close behind. He didn't bother running.

Mooney saw the door that led to the basement. It was open. But then remembered what was down there.

The laundry room was also just a few steps away, which had a door that led to the back yard. She wouldn't go. There was no sense in her running out of the house when Teddy was still inside. Where would she even go? She would stay in the house until she found him.

Chester's hard footsteps let her know he was about to enter the kitchen.

She grabbed the basement door handle and slammed it shut, then tiptoed until she entered the hallway. Mooney leaned her back against the wall, hoping Chester would be convinced enough by that slam. If not, he would turn the corner, and she would swing the axe. Something made Mooney wish that would happen. He would never see it coming. But she had to get to Teddy.

"Well, you're just stupid. Sure, go down there with them venomous ones. They'll treat ya real nice."

Chester opened the basement door. She peaked around the corner and saw the syringes in his back pocket bob up and down. Once Chester was three steps down, she ran to the door, slammed it, and locked it.

Chester began beating on the other side, yelling, "You let me in."

Mooney ran to the staircase. "Teddy? Where are you? We have to hurry." She was proud of her diversion, but she knew that Chester only had to walk out of the basement and back to the front door. He would be in the house again soon, so they needed to hurry.

"Mooney, where is he?" Teddy said as he walked to the top of the stairs.

"I locked him in the basement, but he'll be back. Where have you been?"

"I'm trying to find my bat."

Chester kept kicking and banging on the basement door.

“There’s snakes all in the car. We can’t get back in.”

“What about Turnip?”

Mooney dropped her head and took a deep breath, “It’s unlikely.”

“There’s something I need to do. The Reid’s are only through the woods. But you need to go. When he gets back inside the house, go back out through the back door and run.”

“What? No, I’m not leaving you here with him.”

“I’ve been in here with him for twelve years. I can distract him for a little while longer. Go get help.”

“Hell no. We go together.”

“I’m sick of this. Get both of your asses out here, now.” Chester was out of the basement and almost to the front porch. His voice entered the house before he jogged up the porch steps.

“Hide and then run,” Teddy whispered as he walked away.

Mooney found her way to the dining room. She saw Gloria’s sewing stuff sprawled around the table’s surface. Supplies were all over the place. There were two sewing machines at each end of the table. As quietly as she could, she pulled out one of the table’s chairs and crawled under the table and positioned herself between the other chair legs. The carpet was rough on her kneecaps as she slid the chair back in place. There were eight in total and probably most hadn’t been used since last Christmas.

“We can go ahead and get this over with. It won’t take but a few seconds.”

Chester’s voice echoed as he walked closer to the dining room. She was glad he decided

to stay downstairs. At least this gave Teddy enough time to do whatever he needed to do. As she tried to keep still, she wondered what he was doing.

“Y’all acting like a bunch of snakes in the grass. I’m a professional at this.”

She held the axe close to her, making sure to keep her eyes focused.

Chester entered the dining room. He made a hissing noise with his mouth as he circled the table, “Here snaky, snaky.”

The adrenaline pumping through her veins made Mooney’s head throb.

Her physical pain didn’t matter right now. She and Teddy needed to get far away from this place so someone could get Turnip to a hospital. As she held the axe in her hand, she wondered if her brother would be proud of her for standing up for herself, for Teddy and Turnip, and for not going down without a fight.

And she would fight until she couldn’t fight anymore, but her body was slowly giving out.

*

Upstairs, Teddy walked into his parents’ bedroom. He knew his dad could walk in at any moment, so he had to move fast. He began looking around the room for his bat that Gloria hid from him. He looked inside the closet, under piles of clothes, and finally under the bed. Bingo.

Slowly, he pulled it out. He gripped the handle and began walking out of the bedroom when he saw the snake cross that his dad loved. Teddy wanted to bust it to pieces with his bat, but he couldn’t swing. It would be too noisy. He opened the bedroom door and inched across the hall to the snake room. Teddy gripped the bat tight in his hand

just in case, but he didn't know if he had the nerve to hit his dad. Perhaps it was a long time coming.

The snakes were in their tanks, unaware of everything happening on the opposite side of their glass walls.

The room was arranged like a traveling zoo but felt like a museum. Tanks were on storage shelves and lined around the walls, on the ground. Teddy saw one lone tank that sat on top of his mother's old sewing table like a shrine.

Mildred was on full display, his dad's favorite, and the star of the snake room.

"I hate you."

*

Mooney stayed still and quiet as Chester walked around the dining room. She knew there was a possibility he knew she was under the table. Why would he be circling it over and over again? After the fourth or fifth time, Mooney focused her eyes on the dirty, worn-out pair of New Balances only men his age wore.

She clutched the axe and closed her eyes for a couple of seconds to help control her breathing.

When she opened them, Chester was bent down on his hands and knees, staring at her from the head of the table.

"Gotcha."

Mooney crawled backward and kicked the chair out with her feet. Chester grabbed her by the throat before she could swing the axe.

He squeezed his hand tight enough to rattle her, but then he added more pressure as the seconds ticked away. She tried to raise the axe, but he grabbed it and tossed it across the room. He didn't need the axe to kill her. He had other plans.

"I never really liked you." Chester's hand constricted as he picked her up from the ground and slammed her on top of the dining room table. Pieces of fabric and sewing supplies flew away. She stretched her arms out to the side, trying to find something she could use. Her fingers grazed something cold. Without looking, she held them in her fingers and stabbed him in the arm. Chester let go of her throat.

Mooney used both feet to kick him off her. Her force knocked him off his balance.

He crashed into the grandfather clock that belonged to Gloria's parents.

Mooney left the pair of scissors inside his arm and jumped off the table. She tried to search for the axe but realized that Chester and the clock fell on top of it. Mooney didn't hear Chester get up to run after her, but she knew it was only a matter of time before he got up, so she ran as fast as she could to the staircase.

*

Teddy bent down and studied the various snakes behind the glass. There were all kinds, some he could identify, but others he could not. The snakes were lying there, not doing a thing. He wondered why his dad, other than his connection to his granddad, liked the snakes so much. They were not exciting creatures to look at.

He heard someone running up the stairs, but the footsteps were too quick for his dad to make. He gripped the baseball bat in his hand, ready to swing just in case. Then, Mooney appeared in the doorway.

“What are you doing? We need to leave.”

“What are *you* doing? Why didn’t you run.”

“I told you I wasn’t leaving you.”

“Where is he now?”

“I stabbed him with a pair of scissors. He won’t be down for long.”

“Hang on.”

“What?”

He returned to Mildred. She was lining the front of the tank, stretched out, but also tangled at the same time. Snakes were weird with their bodies.

“We have to go, now.”

Quickly, Teddy swung the bat at Mildred’s tank. The wooden bat didn’t break the glass, but the impact made Teddy’s hands vibrate. Once he figured out that he couldn’t break the glass, he grabbed the tank and tossed it to the floor. The drop made the lid come off, and the bulb shattered to pieces.

“This is his favorite regular snake, Mildred.”

“That’s a stupid name for a snake.”

Teddy reached down and grabbed the snake by the back of the head and gripped his baseball bat in the other.

“Let’s go.”

The snake tried to move its head in Teddy’s grip. He squeezed his fingers together as hard as he could.

He squeezed, unafraid of the snake, and thought how amazing it was how a person was capable of doing things when they reached their breaking point. And Teddy

was there. He didn't know if it was possible, but he hoped he could break the snake's neck if he squeezed hard enough.

Teddy followed Mooney to the foyer. The dining room was just to the right, past the archway. Chester wasn't on the ground anymore. Teddy saw his mom's favorite clock on the ground, broken. The axe was also in the rubble.

Chester knew the kids would come down eventually, knew they would try to leave the house so he stood on the front porch, off to the side. As they entered the foyer, he blocked the doorway. He didn't grab the axe. Once the kids saw him, they froze. Chester was pleased to see his son holding a snake. It was Mildred. But it looked like he was squeezing her too tight around the neck. He had never seen the expression Teddy was wearing before. It was anger.

And Mildred was stuck between his tiny, mad fingers.

"You can stop. You don't have to do anything else," Teddy said.

"That's not true."

Confused, Chester heard sirens roar in the distance, and he knew he didn't have much time. Mooney tried to stand up straight, but she couldn't.

"I just need to do something first."

"What more could you do?" Teddy asked.

"The only way they'll understand is if you feed them. Feed them the venom. Make them know," in the silence, Sherman whispered inside his ear.

"Take you both with me when I go," Chester said.

Chester lunged toward the kids, forcing them into the dining room where he cornered them. He grabbed his son first and slapped him across the face. Once Teddy dropped Mildred, Chester collected her from the ground. She was moving idly, injured.

“You almost killed her.”

“Good, I hope she does die,” Teddy groaned from the ground.

Chester turned and faced Mooney, who was reaching for the axe. Chester had to give it to her, she was brave and fearless. But also a pain in his ass.

He grabbed her shoulders and tossed her back making her stumble over the chairs she had knocked down earlier. He reached inside his pocket for the venom filled syringes.

“What the hell are those?” Mooney asked.

“You want your brother back? Go be with him.”

Chester hovered over her and inserted the needle into her arm.

The police, ambulance, and fire truck sirens now roared up the driveway. The lights from the automobiles flooded the dining room’s dark walls.

Teddy laid on the ground, weak, and exhausted. He tried to crawl toward his best friend, who was pinching flesh between her fingers, shrieking, “Get it out, get it out.”

“No,” Teddy tried to stand up but failed when his dad picked him up and laid him on top of the table.

With Mildred and the headless albino snake wrapped around his neck, he heard loud shouts from the people outside, warning him to surrender. He felt the darkness, felt Sherman’s hands on his shoulders, encouraging him to inject his son with the venom.

He obeyed.

Teddy cried out from the pinch as the needle jabbed into his right thigh.

“Put it in yourself next, Chester. Come be with me. Let’s all be together.” He heard Sherman’s voice in his head with the backdrop of his precious rattlers cheering him on.

He emptied the syringe into his son.

The house was invaded within seconds. As the cops swarmed the dining room, he quickly stabbed himself with the third needle, pressed the top of the syringe, and filled himself with his rattlesnake’s juice.

The feeling he had was glorious. It must’ve been what the preachers and his dad felt like when they handled serpents. The entire house was crawling with police officers, paramedics, and Gloria. His vision became blurry, but he saw his wife, who ran in behind the first responders, yelling something. He couldn’t hear Gloria shouting *how dare you* or the paramedics yelling *call the hospital*, but could hear his father.

“Good job, son.”

He believed the warm feeling coursing through his veins was the venom making itself home in his body. It was like whiskey to a drinker.

The tender feeling of his father’s touch enveloped him, but in reality, it was not his father who was touching him. It was his wife fists pounding down on his body. She was mad, and he didn’t care. At some point, someone began dragging him out of the house. Once he was outside, they dropped him back to the ground. The sun was just now starting to go down.

“Watch out for the snakes. Some are crawling around the yard.” Someone said as Chester kept his eyes closed.

“Woah, stand back,” A paramedic yelled.

He felt one of his babies slithering up his leg. He didn't have to open his eyes to see, but when he did, he was staring the rattlesnake in the face. He heard someone walking above him and when he looked up, Sherman was standing over him. His father knelt beside him, put his hand on his chest, and closed his eyes. "Please forgive us for our sins."

Chester felt the warmth of his father and the fangs of the snake bury into his skin.

He felt alive.